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# DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„Trauma and the Healing Potential of Narrative in Anne  
Michaels’s Novels“

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2011

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuer:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Ewald Mengel

*For all those who know it anyway,  
which makes the mentioning of names redundant.*

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

“Trauma” and “narrative”, the two key terms around which this discussion of Anne Michaels’s novels *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault* centres, seem to have no common ground. However, they share one basic characteristic: both are intrinsic parts of our everyday life.

“Trauma”, as Hacking phrases it, has become a “Metapher für fast alles Unangenehme” (238), and Miller and Tougaw even claim that “[i]f every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma” (1). After some consideration, these statements are certainly not surprising. On the one hand, the traumatic events and experiences provoked, e.g., by two World Wars or the Cold War, dominated the last century and definitely shaped our society and still influence our present world view. On the other hand, we just need to switch on the television or open a newspaper to find a proof of trauma’s omnipresence in the world, our society or even our next neighbourhood.

“Narrative” is likewise a crucial part of our life. According to Roland Barthes “[t]he narratives of the world are numberless [...] [they are] simply there, like life itself” (*Structural Analysis* 79). They exist among all peoples, at all times and in all forms and are a crucial component of everyday life. Narrative is used to understand, convey or explain one’s perceptions, experiences or actions (Abbott 11) and therefore can be defined “as *the* distinctive human trait” (Abbott 1).

Since trauma and narrative seem to be thus omnipresent and influential in our lives, it is certainly interesting and fascinating to investigate to what extent they are related to each other. The medium that has been chosen to do so are the two novels by Anne Michaels.

*Fugitive Pieces*, published in 1996, and *The Winter Vault*, published thirteen years later, are examples of two beautiful narratives. Written in an unusually rich and imaginary language that clearly shows that the novels come from the pen of a well-known Canadian poet, they capture the reader from the very first moment. One is transported either to Greece or Poland of the 1940s and 1950s, or is allowed to wander the Canadian countryside or the riverbanks of the Nile in the 1960s, and one may accompany the

various characters on their way from childhood to adulthood. One dives into a world that is fleshed out and graspable and can lose oneself in Michaels's reflections on the sense of life or on the importance of love.

Both novels are also narratives about trauma and traumatized characters. Most of the time we witness how they suffer from the loss of beloved people, from the destruction of their homes or from other traumatizing living conditions. We see their attempts to come to terms with their trauma, their efforts to express their feelings and fears to others and their search for love, meaning and happiness in their lives. Michaels's novels thus obviously show how trauma influences and shatters one's life, and one aim of this thesis is therefore to treat *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault* as texts about trauma. Using parts of traditional and contemporary trauma theory, it will be illustrated how trauma is reflected on the story level, i.e., how it affects the characters and their lives, and also how trauma is presented on the discourse level, i.e., how it appears in the novels' structure or motifs. This discussion will show whether trauma theory is indeed a helpful and efficient tool for interpretation in literary studies or should rather be left to the fields of psychoanalysis or medicine where it has its roots.

However, the second and more important aim is to trace the answer Michaels gives to the question whether trauma can be healed or not and, if yes, which ways for recovery she proposes. The theory used for this undertaking comes again from trauma studies, but it will be combined with approaches from psychotherapy, historiography and literary studies. In fact, it is argued that some form of "narrative" with its unique characteristics and its crucial status in our lives is the most suitable tool to come to terms with trauma. Within this context it is then shown how trauma and narrative are interconnected both in reality and in the novels and why narratives are a useful if not essential tool for healing.

In the first chapter the concept of "narrative" is therefore investigated, using both a structuralist approach, which concentrates on the inner components of narrative, and a hermeneutic approach, which focuses on how narrative and reality are related and how they influence each other. Based on this theoretical background, the concept of "life

narrative” (cf. Ricoeur *Life*)<sup>1</sup> is introduced and discussed. As the term already implies, this concept is concerned with both the structure and construction of a narrative as well as its relation to reality. It stands for the idea that we perceive, describe and understand our life with the help of narratives. The concept of life narrative will be the basis for the following discussion of trauma and its impact on a person’s life as well as for the possible ways to come to terms with it.

The second chapter, then, concentrates on how and why trauma is so destructive to our life narrative and identity. It starts with a brief introduction to the evolution of trauma theory throughout the last century in order to provide a context for the following discussion. The remaining part of the chapter will focus on the typical characteristics of traumatic experiences and memories, how they differ from normal narrative memories and how their intrusive and elusive character makes recovery almost impossible. Finally, the particular effects trauma has on one’s psyche and body and of course on one’s life narrative and identity development are described.

The third chapter concentrates on how Michaels describes trauma and her traumatized characters in the two novels. It illustrates how their life narrative and their identities have been shattered and from which effects they suffer. Likewise, the portrayal of trauma on the discourse level, that is how it is represented in the structure, form and motifs of the novels, is discussed.

The forth chapter moves on to the discussion of possible ways of healing and which role narrative plays in them. Despite controversies whether trauma can be healed at all, it is argued that for a recovery, trauma has to be claimed. One has to translate it into a language so that it can be articulated and one needs to transform it into an ordered and meaningful narrative. Subsequently, it can be successfully included into one’s identity and life narrative, which in turn allows to re-establish continuity and meaning in one’s life. The second essential step in one’s recovery process is to tell the trauma narrative to others. Only if it is recognized as relevant and meaningful by a witness or an empathic listener, one can fully recover.

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<sup>1</sup> The translations of this concept vary. David Wood, e.g., translates it as “life story” (20), Mario Valdés as “story of a life” (Ricoeur, *Life* 425), but most critics, esp. van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (3-4), refer to it as “life narrative” and this term is also used in this thesis.



The final chapter tries to trace the suggested ways of healing in the novels. It is investigated who uses which method and whether the characters come to terms with their trauma successfully, are either still in the process, or remain stagnated. It is also investigated in how far Michaels's depiction of healing through the means of narrative corresponds to methods used in psychotherapy. Finally, the novels are briefly discussed with regard to the discussion whether any form of aesthetic representation is appropriate to represent or claim trauma.

To sum up, this thesis tries to show the relation between trauma and narrative, in particular in Anne Michaels's novels. On the one hand, it illustrates how trauma disrupts and destroys narrative; on the other hand it is shown how narrative can also be the very means for recovery. It is argued that Michaels's characters acknowledge the incomprehensible and destructive nature of trauma, but nevertheless they refuse to remain eternally helpless and traumatized. Michaels rather concentrates on how one struggles to come to terms with one's trauma and which healing potential narratives offer to arrive at some more or less satisfying solution. With regard to the omnipresence of trauma in our everyday life, such a stance is certainly worth investigating, because in the end everyone wants his life to be whole and meaningful.

## **2 NARRATOLOGY**

### **2.1 WHAT IS "NARRATIVE"? – A STRUCTURALIST APPROACH**

For a general definition of "narrative" a structuralist approach is most helpful. Structuralism concentrates merely on the composition of a narrative and its inherent components and structure. The most important distinction to be made at this point is between the concepts of "story", "narrative discourse" and "narrative". Subsequently the "narrative units", the basic components of every narrative are discussed.

### 2.1.1 Story, Narrative Discourse and Narrative

It is rather difficult to draw a clear distinction between “story” and “narrative”, since these terms are often used synonymously. Abbott (32), for example, defines story as an underlying, pre-existing entity to narrative. It is “the event or sequence of events” (Abbott 13) and as such it is chronological, causal and logical (Abbott 14, 30). Ryan further argues that story “is a mental image, a cognitive construct” (*Narrative* 347) which concerns a world, its entities (e.g., characters, objects, places and a temporal system) and the relations between these entities (e.g., changes through actions or happenings). “This network of connections gives events coherence, motivation, closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot” (Ryan, *Narrative* 347)<sup>2</sup>.

Then there is the distinction between “*story* (the argument), comprising [this] logic of actions and a ‘syntax’ of characters, and *discourse*, comprising the tenses, aspects and modes of the narrative” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 87). In other words, “narrative discourse” translates the story into words and thus allows its conveyance to others. We never perceive story separately, but always mediated, that is, through creating or reading the narrative discourse (Abbott 17, 19).

“Narrative” then combines story and discourse (Ryan, *Narrative* 347). It is created by selecting and representing the relevant elements of story and by portraying them according to one’s wishes through narrative discourse (Abbott 32-33). Story, “in other words, is *translatable* without fundamental damage” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 121) and discourse is “infinitely malleable” (Abbott 15). Their combination in one narrative is the final stage, which gives them a fixed form of conveyance, a purpose and a meaning (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 121). In the following the essential components of narrative are discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sarbin (3).

### 2.1.2 Narrative Units

According to Barthes, a narrative is always a creation, “a veritable fabrication of a world” (*Structuralist Activity* 84)<sup>3</sup>. It has an underlying grammar and thus contains several, hierarchically structured levels (e.g., the levels of story and narrative discourse). In order to understand the narrative, one needs to understand the structure of this grammar and to move flexibly from one level to the other (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 86-87).

Barthes (*Structural Analysis* 89) further claims that every “narrative unit” has a meaning and a function; even the smallest and apparently unimportant one may become significant in the course of the plot. There are different classes, namely the “distributional” units, the so called “*functions*”, which function on the same level (e.g., buying a revolver presupposes using it) and the “integrational” units (e.g., character traits, atmosphere), the “*indices*”, which become only obvious as functional when one moves between the different levels (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 91-92). Therefore, “the former correspond to a functionality of doing, the latter to a functionality of being” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 93).

The ‘functions’ can be further divided into “nuclei” and “catalysers” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 93)<sup>4</sup>. Nuclei are the essential components of the narrative, they form its skeleton and they are bound together by their temporal, causal or logical relations (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 101). Narrative therefore “represents a chronologically ordered sequence of states and events” (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 124). Catalysers, e.g., additional information, descriptions or unimportant incidents, are the filling material between the nuclei, but although less important for the development of the narrative, they are necessary to create the atmosphere, the realness and vividness or plausibility of the narrative universe (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 94-95)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, every element of

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<sup>3</sup> For a comment on Barthes’s article “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” see Onega (270).

<sup>4</sup> Ryan calls them “kernels” and “satellites” or “plot-functional” and “nonfunctional information” (*Possible Worlds* 125); Abbott distinguishes between “constituent events” and “supplementary events” (21).

<sup>5</sup> See also Ryan (*Possible Worlds* 125).

a narrative has a function: “A nucleus cannot be deleted without altering the story, but neither can a catalyst without altering the discourse” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 95).

The narrative’s creator has to order and combine these parts to a meaningful whole (Barthes, *Structuralist Activity* 86) while its reader has to recognize the relations between the several units and levels and uses parts of her/his own knowledge and experiences to arrive at a coherent and meaningful narrative (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 124). In Barthes’s words, “to listen is not only to perceive a language, it is also to construct it” (*Structural Analysis* 102). As a result, a narrative for Barthes is always an object of communication between a sender, i.e., the narrator, and a receiver, i.e., the listener/reader (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 109) and it always allows different readings and interpretations (Onega 271)<sup>6</sup>. The role of the author and the narrator is “not to ‘transmit’ the narrative but to display it” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 115), because “[n]arration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it” (Barthes, *Structural Analysis* 115).

This last point already introduces the assumption that life and narrative are strongly related, if not interconnected. This question will be the focus of the discussion in the next section.

## **2.2 THE RELATION BETWEEN REALITY AND NARRATIVE – A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH**

Paul Ricoeur defines a text/narrative as “a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself” (*Life* 431). In other words, a person refers to the world, describes events and experiences, communicates with others and understands her/himself when writing, reading or listening to a narrative. There is thus a “hinge between the (internal) configuration of a work and the (external) refiguration of a life” (Ricoeur, *Life* 432).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Barthes “there is no ‘degree zero’ of writing, that a text does not have a unitary meaning injected into it by a unitary author” (Onega 271). In his book *S/Z* he focuses even more on the reader and his role as a creative constructor of meaning beside the author (Onega 271-272); Onega calls this the reader’s “co-authorship” (271).

This hinge depends much on a process called “emplotment”<sup>7</sup> (Ricoeur, *Life* 426). As has been shown, narratives generally structure events, experiences and actions (=the elements of story; both nuclei and catalysers) through a form of conveyance (=the discourse) into a larger, meaningful concept, the “plot”. Emplotment is then the “transformative action” (Duffy 27) that selects and orders elements of reality and configures them into a plot so that they become both meaningful and significant for the narrative and its development (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 56-57, 65).

For Ricoeur a narrative’s plot is not only a structured sequence of nuclei and catalysers, but it is also “a synthesis of the heterogeneous” (*Time and Narrative I* 66)<sup>8</sup>. It always contains concordant elements, i.e., those which conform to some plan or order and which are causally or logically linked to each other, and discordance which is created through unpredictable or unwelcomed elements that transform the story or force the course of the plot into another direction than planned (Ricoeur, *Selbst als Anderer* 174; Mattern 160-161)<sup>9</sup>. Both concordance and discordance are necessary for the progress of the narrative’s plot (Ricoeur, *Life* 426; *Selbst als Anderer* 175). However, in the course of reading or writing a narrative one always favours concordance over discordance; that is, one usually tries to integrate and order events and experiences into the narrative so that they conform with its desired goal and meaning. The thus created synthesis in the representation of reality offers patterns and suggestions for the interpretation of the narrative’s meaning (Duffy 27).

Narratives also have a very special treatment of temporality. Their representation of events or experiences may not conform to physical time, because they can stretch and thus emphasize what is important and shorten or eliminate what is uninteresting. Narratives treat time actually as we usually perceive it, namely as fluid and malleable<sup>10</sup>. Ricoeur even claims that “time [only] becomes human to the extent that it is articulated

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<sup>7</sup> This term is used in the translation by David Wood (Ricoeur, Paul. “Life in Quest of Narrative.” *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*. Trans. David Wood. Ed. David Wood. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. 20-33) of the same article as Mario Valdés included in his book, but apart from this term, all further quotes are taken from Valdés’s text.

<sup>8</sup> See also Ricoeur (*Life* 426).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concept of “plot” see Ryan (*Possible Worlds*, chapter 7).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of our usual understanding of time opposed to physical time see Crossley (*Narrative Psychology* 360) and for a discussion of the temporal aspect of emplotment see Crossley (*Formulating Narrative Psychology* 293) or Mattern (152-163).

through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (*Time and Narrative I* 52). Emplotment thus also creates a synthesis between two different perceptions of time. The one treats time as flux, as a chronological succession of events from past to present and future, the other is concerned with time as stable entity, with the configuration and integration of events under overarching themes (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 66; *Life* 427)<sup>11</sup>. Emplotment now “transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 67) and enables the reader to follow the narrative in expectation of some resolution and fulfilment of one’s hopes or desires in the conclusion (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 66-67).

However, as indicated in the previous section, narratives always rely on the reader to complete the plot (Duffy 34). One only achieves a full recognition of the workings of emplotment and its synthesis of concordant and discordant elements, of time as flux and time as stable entity by reading the whole narrative and arriving at a meaningful and satisfying conclusion (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 67; *Life* 432). In fact, Ricoeur’s “thesis here is that the process of composition, of configuration, does not realize itself in the text but in the reader” (*Life* 430).

### **2.3 LIFE NARRATIVE, NARRATIVE MEMORY AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY**

This interaction between life and narrative gave rise to the idea of a “life narrative” (cf. Ricoeur, *Life*) in, e.g., literary studies, cognitive science, as well as psychology and psychotherapy. This is what Brockmeier and Harré call the “narrative turn” (39).

Not only Ricoeur (*Selbst als Anderer* 200; *Time and Narrative I* 75)<sup>12</sup> argues that narrative is an inherent part of life, but several other scholars<sup>13</sup> believe in a close and

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<sup>11</sup> See also Crossley (*Formulating Narrative Psychology* 293) or Mattern (152-157).

<sup>12</sup> See also Antze (6).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Wyatt (193), Sarbin (8-9, 12-15), Crossley (*Narrative Psychology* 361), Crossley (*Formulating Narrative Psychology* 291), White and Epston (27, 85), Tuval-Mashiach et al. (281), van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (1-3).

reciprocal relationship between life, reality and narrative. They therefore claim that one thinks, experiences, acts, understands, organizes and relates to oneself, others and the world by using narrative structures. Narrative is “associated with sense-making and problem-solving activities” (Ryan, *Narrative* 345)<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, it may hand down knowledge, enforce cultural and social value and it is likewise an instrument for self-creation, self-representation and self-perception (Ryan, *Narrative* 345).

If our life has a narrative structure, so do our memories. One of the first psychologists to deal with the relation between memory and narrative (and also the impact of trauma on memory) was Pierre Janet, who introduced the idea of a “narrative memory”. According to him, ordinary experiences are assimilated and stored in our memory as narratives without much effort (van der Kolk and van der Hart 159-160; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 56)<sup>15</sup>. Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (56) further argue that some memories are stored as schemas<sup>16</sup> within a whole network of narratives and people use those schemas to help them make sense of new experiences (see also van der Kolk and van der Hart 169-171; van der Kolk and McFarlane 8). They usually have no difficulties to integrate even emotionally loaded experiences into this memory network (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 20), because “they will generally transcribe these sensations into a narrative” (van der Kolk 296). Van der Kolk and van der Hart even go so far as to claim that “[n]ew experiences can only be understood in the light of prior schemas” (170) and “an experience does not really exist until it can be named and placed into larger categories” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 4). Those schemas which help us to order and understand our experiences and memories in turn enable us to store our life in some autobiographical memory (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 17-18), which is again crucial for the formation and stabilization of one’s personal and cultural/social identity or history (A. Assmann 18).

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<sup>14</sup> See also D. Herman (349).

<sup>15</sup> This idea of narrative memory still persists today. For example, in psychological approaches to narrative (see Gerrig 473), and Abbott (2-3) also sees the relation between narrative and memory confirmed, since our first memories usually stem from the time we develop the ability to put words together to form sentences and narratives.

<sup>16</sup> A schema is an ordered mental set of collected experiences and knowledge about, e.g., how certain events or actions usually occur or how one should behave in certain situations. These schemas help us to react to new situations and offer us a guideline on how to behave or make sense of new experiences (van der Kolk and van der Hart 170).

Ricoeur thus argues that “[l]ife can only be properly understood by being re-told mimetically through stories” (Duffy 27) and Brockmeier agrees that “[l]ife needs plots” (278)<sup>17</sup>. As has been indicated in the discussion of the structuralist and hermeneutic approach, two activities are involved in the construction of a narrative. The first is the activity of emplotment, the selection of the story elements and the decision on the form of discourse. The other is the reading and reception of the narrative by others without which the creation of a narrative remains incomplete. In the following section both aspects will be discussed with regard to one’s life narrative.

### 2.3.1 Narrating

Everyone constructs her/his personal life narrative through the emplotment of one’s personal reality into one coherent text with a temporal and spatial setting and an aim for a synthesis between discordance and concordance. We turn our life into a narrative to bring order and coherence into a chaotic amount of events, experiences, actions or memories and to make it less ambiguous and transient. Our life narrative serves as a means of representing, understanding and controlling our life and as a help to develop our identity. This “expresses the idea that living one’s life and reflecting upon it is like writing one’s life story: a continuous act of self-creation that involves at every moment choices, responsibility, re-evaluations, and the addition of new chapters to the book-in-progress” (Ryan, *Narrative* 345)<sup>18</sup>.

“Narrating a life [therefore] means becoming the author of one’s life” (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 1)<sup>19</sup>. Our building blocks are the nuclei and catalyser which all carry (sometimes even several) functions and meaning. As authors we have to select those nuclei and catalysers<sup>20</sup> which are meaningful and “exceptional”, i.e., worth telling and relevant for the course of one’s life narrative, from the underlying story and integrate them into our narrative (Bruner 29; Carr 121). Some of these nuclei and catalysers may be pre-imposed by culture or society (e.g., changes in one’s career,

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<sup>17</sup> See also White and Epston (58).

<sup>18</sup> See also Crossley (*Formulating Narrative Psychology* 290-291).

<sup>19</sup> See also the discussion of “the psychoanalyst’s set” (Wyatt 201-205), which describes what a person tries to accomplish by telling her/his narrative.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of those “turning points” see Bruner (31-35).



marriage, birth of a child, divorce, death etc.), but generally we can select them on our own (Linde, *Life Story* 277-278). We can put the emphasis on different aspects and develop several narratives or interpretations of the past and present and we may choose from several possibilities for the future (cf. White and Epston 25-26).

We can also choose the way we want to present the story; that is, we can decide about the form of narrative discourse. Van Alphen even argues that “[e]xperience depends on discourse to come about” (24), because only in this way do we claim the story as our personal one. In addition, through the decision about the form of the discourse, as well as through the choice of some nuclei and catalysers of our story over others, the narrative also tells something about us (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 74-75) and the values and norms we cherish. In this way “we [also] become ethical beings: in the telling of our life stories, we become responsible for our lives” (Crossley, *Formulating Narrative Psychology* 294).

However, our life narrative’s plot may be dynamic or even discontinuous, since the individual can constantly alter the choice of elements (Ricoeur, *Life* 426; Linde, *Life Story* 278). Some experiences and events may be perceived as unimportant or redundant or they may be problematic or unpleasant episodes so that they are never integrated into our life narrative (White and Epston 27). One could claim that our life can be divided into told and “*not yet told*” stories (Ricoeur, *Life* 434-435)<sup>21</sup>. In *Fugitive Pieces* Jakob is aware of this fact and comments: “Never trust biographies. Too many events in a man’s life are invisible” (Michaels, *FP*<sup>22</sup> 141). Those not yet told events<sup>23</sup> however remain in our unconsciousness and may even disturb the coherence of one’s life narrative or identity development; on the other hand, they are also available for a possible integration into the life narrative (White and Epston 29-30). Therefore, “[l]ife stories change over time, and in relation to the situation of telling. New narratives are added, old ones are dropped or reframed” (Linde, *Life Story* 278). In one’s life narrative as well as in one’s

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<sup>21</sup> See also Ricoeur (*Time and Narrative I* 74-75).

<sup>22</sup> Short form used for quotes from *Fugitive Pieces*.

<sup>23</sup> White and Epston use the term “*einmalige Ereignisfolge*” (30) to describe those not yet included and potentially disturbing events or experiences, which nevertheless need to be integrated into the narrative to help the person to find continuity and order.

identity development nothing is ever closed, but everything is in process (Olney 6; White and Epston 84-85).

The main aim of the emplotment of one's reality is to make the life narrative meaningful (Brockmeier 249; Crossley, *Formulating Narrative Psychology* 296). This includes not only the selection of its components, but also to find a balance between the concordant and discordant elements in our life narrative so that we can create continuity and coherence towards a meaningful and satisfying conclusion (Tuval-Mashiach et al. 282; Antze 6). As van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela state: "We examine our lives to find central *themes* and *patterns* which permeate our diverse experiences" (2) and help us to make them meaningful. We may not be able to come to a full understanding of our life or gain total control of its course; but as long as we "strive towards a meaningful existence and [try] to live the best of possible lives" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 3) this does not really matter.

Furthermore, our life narrative also has to include both perceptions of time (White and Epston 86). It should portray a continuity from past to present and into the future (Crites 163-170; Crossley, *Formulating Narrative Psychology* 292-294). That is, we should be able to recognize the chronology of the sequences of actions and events, but also to see the overarching relations and connections that let us experience narrative as a whole (D. Herman 360; Miller 407).

This is especially relevant for the development and manifestation of our self, our identity. Through the construction of the plot and through the way we narrate our life narrative, "we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world" (Bruner 25)<sup>24</sup>. However, even with the help of a narrative, our self is hard to be pinned down, since it is develops constantly, but remains stable at the same time (Olney 29; Bruner 28).

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<sup>24</sup> In his article "Selbst und Narrativität" Teichert offers a detailed discussion about the relation between narrative and self. For further arguments concerning the necessity and significance of narrative for one's identity development see King (2-3), Duffy (25), Carr (125), Freeman (296); Crites (162) or Olney (35).

### *Narrative Identity*

According to Ricoeur (*Narrative Identity* 189; *Selbst als ipse* 108; *Selbst als Anderer* 144-145), our personal identity has two components<sup>25</sup>: The “idem-identity” which describes “identity as sameness” or as resemblance<sup>26</sup>. This sort of identity contains physical features, character traits or basic moral and social beliefs, which is characterized by an “uninterrupted continuity” (Ricoeur, *Narrative Identity* 190; *Selbst als Anderer* 145) and a “*permanence in time*” (Ricoeur *Narrative Identity* 190; *Selbst als Anderer* 146). The “ipse-identity”, on the other hand, describes “identity as selfhood” (Ricoeur, *Narrative Identity* 189). This model does not focus on a person’s static character, but rather on her/his dynamic agency and responsibility for these actions (Ricoeur, *Narrative Identity* 191).

This twofold identity is clearly problematic with regard to temporality (Ricoeur, *Selbst als ipse* 108-109; *Selbst als Anderer* 144) and Ricoeur thus proposes another identity model consisting of “*Charakter und gehaltenes Wort*” (*Selbst als Anderer* 147).

The ipse-identity is inherent in our “promises” although we may promise to change or to stay the way we are. Either way our identity formation is a question of “self-constancy” (Antze 12)<sup>27</sup>, because the identity development is successful when we decide to remain loyal to ourselves and keep our promises (Ricoeur, *Selbst als ipse* 110). There needs to be a link between the past self that made the promise and the present self that kept it and there should be also a link to the new hopes and wishes for the future (cf. Crites 155-158, 163-164). One’s “character”, on the one hand, contains the components of the idem-identity (Ricoeur, *Selbst als ipse* 109); i.e., the stable qualities. However, we are not born with a character, but have to acquire the perception of these aspects as constant and recognizable in the course of time, e.g. through kept promises (Mattern 200-201).

Narratives are a medium which may portray that some parts of a person’s identity (i.e., the ‘who’ is acting) remain the same, but also shows a development, a change of the self over time. It is thus the place where through emplotment a synthesis between character

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<sup>25</sup> Also discussed by van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (2-3) and Mattern (198-199).

<sup>26</sup> Also called “numerical identity” (Ricoeur, *Selbst als Anderer* 144) and “qualitative identity” (Ricoeur, *Selbst als Anderer* 145).

<sup>27</sup> See also Ricoeur (*Selbst als ipse* 110; *Selbst als Anderer* 154).

and promise can take place (Ricoeur, *Selbst als ipse* 118; Duffy 33). Our “narrative identity”, which can also be associated with our personal identity (Duffy 32), contains both “character” and “kept promise” (Ricoeur, *Selbst als Anderer* 203). As van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela phrase it, “a healthy inner life is characterised by continual letting go of the old and acceptance of the new [...] yet a good life narrative is characterised by constancy amidst change” (21).

### 2.3.2 Reading

As pointed out, emplotment of reality is only one necessary component in the construction of a life narrative. Reality and the narrative are linked through the reader and the activity of reading (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III* 142) and “the meaning or the significance of a story [only] wells up from *the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*” (Ricoeur, *Life* 430). With regard to one’s life narrative this means that in order to make it completely meaningful, we have to be not only its authors, but also its readers and interpreters (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2).

As a story may be the source for different discourses, there are several ways to read and interpret a narrative. Since our life narrative’s plot is dynamic, we can still go back and re-read, re-interpret or even re-write it by altering the story elements or the discourse (cf. King 22-23). We may even have to re-interpret and re-arrange our life narrative, because, as van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (21) argue, our life generally does not run smoothly. There are always some painful, disrupting or apparently senseless experiences that make us question our common beliefs or our identity and there are also always new experiences that need to be integrated.

Furthermore, we are not only the readers of our life narrative, but also of numerous other ones. These may play again a crucial role for the construction of our life narrative. A narrative always opens another world, which we can access as ours through a “fusion of horizons” (Duffy 34)<sup>28</sup>. In other words, while reading we access this world, take it as real and continuously transfer our knowledge of our actual world and the newly gained

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<sup>28</sup> See also Ricoeur (*Life* 431; *Time and Narrative I* 77-81). Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (60) discuss this with regard to the process of “identification” with a character of a narrative.

knowledge in the narrative's world back and forth (Brockmeier and Harré 55). It is this "fusion of horizons" that allows us to feel empathy, pity, excitement, etc. This evocation of emotions and interchange of knowledge is not only crucial for one's understanding of a narrative, but a narrative may also show readers possible ways for ordering or interpreting events and experiences, they may enrich their creativity, motivate them to actions and thus may influence their real lives and perception of themselves (Ricoeur, *Life* 432). Duffy (28, 36), as well as van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (60), claims indeed that we can gain catharsis through reading narratives.

We also turn to the narratives of others for help and guidance in our identity development. Every narrative portrays identities and we can access and select those forms which strike us as pleasant and worth striving for and we take them over as models for our own identity (Ricoeur, *Selbst als ipse* 118-119). By reading other's narratives and entering their worlds, we may thus learn something, because we automatically re-evaluate and renew our perception of our self and/or our own life narrative.

### 2.3.3 Telling

Since the construction of a life narrative involves an interaction between reality and narrative, it can also be a means for interaction between human beings. As Crawford claims, narrative "is also, of course, interpersonal, through the act of telling the story to another" (709).

We read the narratives of others and use them partly as guideline for our own and thus we are linked to the stable norms, morals and values of the community's collective narrative. Additionally, we try to form and evaluate our life narrative, our actions and our identity according to these guidelines in order to become an accepted ethical being (Duffy 32, 37; Freeman and Brockmeier 75-77). Our self is therefore never entirely independent from the culture and society we are born in (Duffy 35; King 31)<sup>29</sup>. Neither is our life narrative. We are born into a set of narratives and have to incorporate their account and interpretations concerning the historical development, the present roles and

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<sup>29</sup> See also Lyotard's discussion (*Postmodern Condition* 15-17).

rules and the future aims and goals of the community (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 4; Freeman 287; White and Epston 28).

Memory likewise has a social and cultural dimension. According to Halbwachs<sup>30</sup> one is always part of a “collective memory and social framework” (38) into which one just integrates one’s personal memories (Whitehead, *Memory* 126; Halbwachs 43). Those frameworks hold the memories together and offer an ordered and meaningful system (Halbwachs 52-53).

This does not hinder us to create our individual life narrative, but the difficulty is to combine the cultural narrative with our personal experiences. We can choose again which collective narratives we incorporate as ours, which are most relevant and exceptional for us and which are not (Bruner 30; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 5). Simultaneously, the integrated collective parts automatically justify one’s individual life narrative and one’s place in the community (Bruner 35); and since “Abschnitte meines Lebens [...] zur Geschichte der Anderen [gehören]” (Ricoeur, *Selbst als Anderer* 197), we also play a role in the narratives of others and in the formation of our whole community (Carr 126-128).

Crossley (*Narrative Psychology* 361), Carr (124) and Duffy (27) even argue that we need a social or cultural context and others as witnesses for the construction and recognition of our life narrative and our self through narratives. Without this recognition by others the narrative does fulfil its purpose only insufficiently. “I cannot be a self on my own but only in relation to certain ‘interlocutors’ who are crucial to my language of self-understanding” (Crossley, *Formulating Narrative Psychology* 298). Our narratives must appeal to an audience who in turn should be willing and interested in listening to them and read and interpret them according to our wishes.

As authors we always try to convey a favoured version of ourselves, and our narratives are usually about “what we consider *communicable* and *memorable* [which] is also what we consider to be *valuable*” (Duffy 31). The dynamic potential of our life narrative’s plot enables us to select those elements which are relevant and interesting and present our experiences in various ways, depending on our audience and on what version of our

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<sup>30</sup> See also J. Assmann (70-71).

narrative and our self we want to convey (Linde, *Life Story* 277; Freeman 290). Janet termed this audience-orientated form of narrating “presentification” (in Leys, *Traumatic Cures* 125). Narratives and the presentation of our identity are therefore never neutral or totally reliable, but may vary from interlocutor to interlocutor (Wyatt 205)<sup>31</sup>.

### 3 TRAUMA THEORY

This chapter gives an introduction to the historical evolution of trauma theory and the definition of the term. It then focuses on the concept of trauma, its general characteristics and more specific effects and in which respect its very nature affects and disrupts one’s attempt to emplot one’s life and construct one’s identity coherently and meaningfully. Since the Holocaust and its aftermath are the main source for the characters’ traumatization in both *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault*, the final section briefly comments on its special place within trauma theory.

#### 3.1 WHAT IS TRAUMA?

##### 3.1.1 The Evolution of Trauma Theory

In the course of time and especially during the last century the term “trauma” has been constantly re-defined. The various definitions of trauma were always influenced by social or cultural trends and also depended on who designed the definition, when and for what purpose (van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart 66; Etherington 22). Nowadays it has become a cultural phenomenon that is used in several disciplines as a concept to refer to a whole range of injuries and disorders (Weigel 255; Rabelhofer).

Originally, according to its Greek roots, the term trauma only referred to an injury of the body, as it still does, e.g., in surgery (Hacking 238). In the course of the centuries it gradually was not just understood as an injury of the body but also of the mind or soul (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 5)<sup>32</sup>. According to most scholars<sup>33</sup> this shift of meaning

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<sup>31</sup> See also Steele (262-273).

<sup>32</sup> For more detailed discussions of how the meaning of the term ‘trauma’ changed and to which extent it was transferred from describing a bodily to a mental injury see A. Young (89-96), Hacking (238-241).

<sup>33</sup> For example Luckhurst (498), Whitehead (*Introduction* 186); Farrell (8-9).

took place in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in connection with the construction of the railway system<sup>34</sup> and a sudden increase in severe accidents. For the first time people observed that apart from a physical injury one could also be mentally affected by such distressing experiences and this idea also entered Charcot's studies on hysteria (Hacking 243-244) and Janet's investigations of memory. Since then, the focus in trauma studies has continually shifted from bodily to cognitive, mental effects (Crawford 717-718).

Studies on trauma and on memory further flourished in Western cultures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of the numerous and devastating wars, like the First and Second World War or the Vietnam War<sup>35</sup> and, of course, genocides like the Holocaust (Etherington 23; Farrell 10; Whitehead, *Memory* 84). One foundation of modern trauma theory probably was Sigmund Freud's studies on hysteria and "shell shock"<sup>36</sup>. Drawing on the ideas of Charcot and Janet, he declared it as impossible for our consciousness to understand or claim traumatizing experiences and events (e.g., sexual abuse) or the resulting traumatic memories (van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart 53-56). According to him, they are "forgotten", that is repressed or blocked into one's unconsciousness, from where they tend to come back after some time and haunt either an individual or a whole group (Berger 570; Whitehead, *Memory* 95; Weinberg 174-175). Later Freud began to mistrust the reliability of memories and he abandoned the idea of trauma resulting from actual events. Instead he focused on the sexual development and repressed (sexual) fantasies and wishes which could have the same impact (Luckhurst 499; van der Kolk and van der Hart 165-166; van der Kolk, van der Hart and Marmar 310; King 18). As Farrell states, until nowadays, trauma's "causality has always been debatable" (6).

More recent models of trauma<sup>37</sup> and its consequences emphasize again the event as the main source for one's traumatization. In 1980 PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)<sup>38</sup>,

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<sup>34</sup> John Eric Erichsen introduced the term "*railway spine*" to describe people's suffering from invisible wounds, which was then also used by Charcot to describe hysterical symptoms in men (Hacking 241-243).

<sup>35</sup> Van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart (56-60) mention the two most influential theorists, namely Abram Kardiner and Henry Krystal.

<sup>36</sup> This term was introduced by Charles Samuel Myers who dealt with traumatized soldiers after World War I (see van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart 48; J. Herman, *Trauma* 20).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Erikson (*Notes* 183-185), Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (5) or Huber (*Teil I* 39).

<sup>38</sup> Van der Kolk, van der Hart and Marmar define PTSD the following way: "the individual has at least three of the following dissociative symptoms: (1) a feeling of detachment, numbing, or lack of emotional responsiveness; (2) decreased awareness of surroundings; (3) derealization; and (5) inability to remember a significant aspect of the trauma" (311).



which is based on this assumption, was introduced (Etherington 25). It was mainly developed to help Vietnam veterans, abused children and rape victims to get compensation money (van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart 61) and thus it tried to define trauma as a clinical illness. Within this context people's subjective reaction towards an event and their individual traumatization were considered. It was acknowledged that not only the victim, but also witnesses or the perpetrators and on a larger scale friends or relatives who identified themselves with the trauma of others can suffer from PTSD and that every person may react differently to trauma (Etherington 25; Huber, *Teil I* 85-86; J. Herman, *Trauma* 58).

However, not every trauma could be defined in terms of PTSD and lately the meaning of the term has again been shifting. Ruth Leys (*Trauma* 263 in Crawford 708), for example, criticizes those definitions of trauma which see it as a result of one single traumatizing event. Erikson also argues that "'trauma' has to be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event" (*Notes* 185) and Judith Herman (*Complex PTSD*) or Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (8, 13-14) likewise differentiate between PTSD after one traumatic experience and Complex PTSD after a series or repetition of traumatic experiences. Dominik LaCapra (*History and Memory* 47)<sup>39</sup> distinguishes between "historical trauma", which is a single traumatic occurrence, like rape or a flood, and "structural or existential trauma", which describes persistent or perpetual traumas. In *The Winter Vault* a character illustrates this division in the following way: "A human life can be destroyed piece by piece [...]. Or all at once" (Michaels, *TWV*<sup>40</sup> 134).

Nowadays the concept of trauma takes a dominant place in our everyday life and culture (Berger 569). There is a general interest in stories about other people's sufferings. According to McFarlane and van der Kolk, "people always seem to have had a well-nigh insatiable appetite for tales of trauma, as long as they do not personally involve the listeners or demand compassion for the victims" (42)<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> See also in Whitehead (*Introduction* 189), van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (11).

<sup>40</sup> Short form used for quotes from *The Winter Vault*.

<sup>41</sup> See also Miller and Tougaw (2).

Trauma theory celebrates a similar popularity<sup>42</sup> and it is indeed a suitable concept to deal with all kinds of atrocities and to explain their continuous impact on our daily life. Therefore, lots of disciplines like cultural and literary studies, psychoanalysis, medicine and neurology are trying to find a definition and a cure for trauma (Erdle 29-30; Luckhurst 497). “Trauma is [thus] intrinsically multidisciplinary” (Luckhurst 506).

### 3.1.2 The very Nature of Trauma and Traumatic Memories

Cathy Caruth, whose definition of trauma aroused new discussions, claims that trauma in its essence “brings us to the limits of our understanding” (Caruth, *Introduction I* 4) and traumatic experiences and memories are therefore differently encoded and recalled from normal ones. In contrast to the usual narrative memories, which are translated into language and structured episodically and which we can recall voluntarily, those traumatic memories<sup>43</sup> can neither be consciously accessed nor translated with the help of our schemas into a continuous autobiographical memory (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 18; Huber, *Teil I* 46-47). The usual ways to integrate memories thus fail, because our mind simply has no suitable categories to assimilate them into our network of memories and narratives (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 56).

Traumatic experiences also exceed any form of transformation and subsequent integration into our life narrative (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 25-26; A. Assmann 23). Trauma “leads to a loss of words, because language is insufficient to describe the experience” (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 6) and leaves a person speechless (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 1; LaCapra, *History* 14). It is thus not stabilized and preserved “in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 37), but in its affective state, i.e., in a disassociated, fragmented, vivid and emotionally loaded form (van der Kolk and van der Hart 160; van der Kolk 289)<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, we cannot modify or adapt it appropriately (be it its length, details,

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion see van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart (62-66).

<sup>43</sup> Huber (*Teil I* 46-47) uses the terms “cool” and “hot” instead of narrative and traumatic memories, which are also commonly used.

<sup>44</sup> In relation to this, Charlotte Delbo’s description of her split memory after her survival of the concentration camp is very famous (cf. Whitehead, *Memory* 117-120). According to her there is a “deep memory” full of sensations and emotions, which evades every schema, which does not fit into one’s life

evoked feelings, etc.) to a present situation, to the needs of our interlocutor or to a given social environment (van der Kolk and van der Hart 163). Traumatic memory thus “*has no place*” (Caruth, *Introduction II* 153); it is stored separately from the other memories in one’s psyche and/or body (A. Young 96; J. Herman, *Trauma* 38; Crawford 707).

Traumatic experiences and memories may be repressed or at least avoided, but they remain unaltered, “in a cryptic state” (A. Assmann 26) in our unconsciousness (Caruth *Introduction II* 152-153). As many scholars state<sup>45</sup>, they destabilize a person’s life narrative and identity, because they still lurk there and whenever they are triggered by sensory or emotional stimuli which are similar to the original traumatic situation, they tend to overwhelm the traumatized person and make her/him relive them.

According to Caruth (*Introduction II* 153)<sup>46</sup>, this happens, because at the time of the traumatic experience a person enters a shocked and frozen state and is thus unaware of the trauma’s real impact. Because it was not claimed or understood during its occurrence, the trauma “returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 4) and since it is forever elusive to meaning there is no escape from reliving it. One central characteristic of trauma is thus that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 2). In other words, it is remembered unconsciously in the form of, e.g., nightmares, re-enactments<sup>47</sup>, flashbacks or hallucinations (Caruth, *Introduction I* 4; LaCapra, *Holocaust Testimonies* 212). J. Herman (*Trauma* 37), as well as van der Kolk and McFarlane (9), use the term “intrusion” to describe this repeated and precise but uncontrolled return of the trauma and critics like Caruth (*Unclaimed Experiences* 4) or Huber (*Teil 2* 193) therefore speak of trauma as a wound that does not heal but “calls out”.

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narrative and thus can never be grasped (Rittner and Roth 329). In contrast, the “external memory, [...] the memory connected with thinking processes” (Delbo, *Days and Memory* in Rittner and Roth 331), which can translate experiences into words enabled her to begin a life after Auschwitz. However, it is occasionally overwhelmed by the lurking deep memory that resides in both body and mind (Delbo, *Days and Memory* in Rittner and Roth 331).

<sup>45</sup> See van der Kolk (296), van der Kolk and van der Hart (164), Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (14), J. Herman (*Trauma* 36) or Etherington (28).

<sup>46</sup> See also van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (26).

<sup>47</sup> Re-enactments describe the phenomenon that trauma victims consciously or unconsciously “feel impelled to re-create the moment of terror, either in literal or in disguised form” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 39).

Its intrusive character makes trauma not only an incomprehensible, but also a delayed experience (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 11). Scholars<sup>48</sup> speak of trauma's "latency" or "Nachträglichkeit". This concept was introduced by Freud, who thus tried to explain why trauma resulting from, e.g., sexual abuse was not realized at the moment of its occurrence, but only experienced consciously later after being triggered by some harmless, yet similar or related experience. It is this revival of the traumatic experience after some time that is more shocking to the victim than the actual experience. They are overwhelmed in an apparently safe environment and, because of its uncontrollable immediacy, the trauma cannot be grasped and therefore is additionally accompanied by a feeling of helplessness. The actual trauma is thus not the traumatic experience itself but rather its continual repetition and re-experience and as such it is absolutely destructive to normal life (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 7, 62-63; *Introduction I* 4).

Another characteristic of traumatic experiences and memories is that they "are fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience" (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172). When those memories are recalled, even after a long time and at another place, they are experienced without any distance; the traumatized person is incapable of distinguishing between past and present (A. Young 93; van der Kolk and van der Hart 177; LaCapra, *History in Transit* 207; *Holocaust Testimonies* 211-212). Neither may s/he be able to relate the past to the present or create any perspectives for a potential future (Brison, *Aftermath* 52-53; *Trauma Narratives* 39; Duffy 51-52). Trauma is thus timeless and placeless (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 69; Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 25) and can be termed "failed experience" (van Alphen 25)<sup>49</sup>, because it can neither be stored as normal memory and it nor be transformed and integrated into a narrative (van Alphen 26).

According to Caruth (*Introduction II* 151), trauma's resistance to any form of transformation or integration into a narrative also implies that the re-experienced traumatic experiences and memories are never distorted; they remain "absolutely true to the event" (Caruth, *Introduction I* 5). They are an accurate and precise imprint of the past, but at the same time are inaccessible for our consciousness; they can neither be

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<sup>48</sup> For example, Caruth (*Unclaimed Experiences* 16-17), Rabelhofer and LaCapra (*History in Transit* 207).

<sup>49</sup> Also referred to by van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (57).

controlled nor understood. Traumatized people are therefore unable to become witnesses to their trauma (Caruth, *Introduction I* 7) and even if one tries to claim it, one automatically faces the impossibility of bearing witness to its truth. Narratives about trauma can be mere fantasies, they may leave out important parts or contradict obvious actualities or historical facts or they are told “in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 14). In other words, any narrative about the traumatic experience(s) involves some distortion of its accuracy. Traumatized people therefore additionally suffer from a “crisis of truth” (Felman, *Education* 17 qtd. in Caruth, *Introduction I* 6).

This apparent unreliability of “claimed” traumatic memories has influenced the discussion about the relation between trauma and history. History means the retrieval of the past and therefore also traumatic or repressed parts (LaCapra, *History* 175) and yet, it seems impossible to write history about trauma, because it forever evades accurate presentation and meaningful interpretation. “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth, *Introduction I* 5). However, Laub (*Bearing Witness* 60-61) and LaCapra (*Holocaust Testimonies* 209-210) argue that despite the unreliability of narratives about trauma, they always testify to something, and be it just the disturbance and horror of the experience.

In any case, because of its incomprehensibility, timelessness, placelessness and resistance to any (accurate) representation, trauma leaves a void which possesses its bearers and remains eternally unclaimed (Rabelhofer; Caruth *Introduction II* 151). As a result traumatized people may develop a fixation on the trauma (van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart 53; van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 419). They cannot move beyond that hole in their life narrative and identity development; the continuity is destroyed, the trauma dominates everything and therefore any further development is put to a halt.

These aspects of trauma are not restricted to individuals, but a community can be similarly affected (Erikson, *Notes* 185-187). Collective trauma is “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the

prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson, *Everything* 154 in Erikson, *Notes* 187). Hayner speaks of the “[u]nhealed wounds of society” (133) that may be as fatal as those of an individual.

### **3.2 EFFECTS OF TRAUMA**

Trauma is now in any case “[e]in *vitalen Diskrepanzerlebnis*” (Fischer 12). It leaves one shocked and with the knowledge that nothing is going to be as it was before (Huber, *Teil I* 40-41; Farrell 19). According to many scholars<sup>50</sup>, it interrupts, disrupts or even destroys one’s life narrative and the development of one’s narrative identity, along with one’s belief in goodness, safety and meaningfulness of life and it alters “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 33). To what degree and how a life narrative is shattered depends on the individual, how her/his mind and body fight to prevent a traumatization (Huber, *Teil I* 68) and on some other “Schutzfaktoren” (Huber, *Teil I* 82) like social relationships, a strong and persistent world view or communicative competences. However, trauma always confronts one with the essential questions: Who am I? Where do I come from and where shall I go? Are there any values, any sense left in the world? Likewise, trauma calls the meaningfulness, the synthesis and order of one’s plot into question.

#### **3.2.1 Effects on the Mind and the Body**

Trauma has however not only an impact upon one’s life narrative and identity development but also on one’s psyche and body. Most of these effects are of course related to the disruption of one’s life narrative and result from the destruction of the continual and meaningful plot or the basic schemas, but before those points are discussed, the most common effects of a traumatization, namely hyperarousal and numbness, are discussed.

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<sup>50</sup> For example Tuval-Mashiach et al. (281), Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (1), van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (6) or Brison (*Trauma Narratives* 48).

Because of the loss of continuity and order in one's life narrative and identity, one usually enters an "*alarm state*" (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 5) that affects both psyche and body; in some cases the body may even remember and react independently from the mind (Brison, *Aftermath* 45). The usual reaction of human beings towards any kind of danger is two-folded and a matter of self-defence – either "*fight or flight*"<sup>51</sup>. It is a pattern of behaviour that is stored in our psyche like other schemas, but trauma disrupts even this basic system of self-protection (J. Herman, *Trauma* 34; Brison, *Aftermath* 40; Farrell 6).

As a result, traumatized people very often suffer from "hyperarousal": They are always alert or frightened and can no longer relax their body (Huber, *Teil I* 69; Brett 121; van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 421). As stated above, any sensory stimulus which reminds traumatized people of the original traumatic situation triggers a reliving of the trauma. Their body cannot adapt, but responds as if the trauma was not a past experience but real again (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 14). Consequently, "[p]atients may become mistrustful and suspect danger everywhere or may have difficulties focusing their attention to activities of daily living or listening to others" (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 9). They may develop uncontrollable fears or aggressions towards others and/or oneself and generally try to repress or evade any confrontation with the trauma (van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 423; J. Herman, *Trauma* 42).

Trauma can also have quite the opposite effect: it "can obliterate one's former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions" (Brison, *Aftermath* 50). In such cases of paralyses one speaks of "numbing". This effect may seem harmless, even one to be appreciated, since people thus protect themselves from the full impact of the trauma, but this attitude may also result in their withdrawal into isolation (Huber, *Teil I* 69), a dislike to take actions or make decisions or interact with others and thus it makes a recovery of one's life narrative and one's identity impossible (J. Herman, *Trauma* 46-47; van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 421).

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<sup>51</sup> This phenomenon was termed by Walter Cannon in 1914 (cf. Huber, *Teil I* 41).

### 3.2.2 Effects on one's Life Narrative and Narrative Identity

The main aim of one's life narrative is to order one's experiences into a coherent structure and to give them meaning. "Trauma, in contrast is about the shattering of life's narrative structure, about a loss of meaning – the traumatised person has 'lost the plot'" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 6).

After trauma people are no longer able to live as they used to do. It appears that trauma victims cannot see the nuclei of the story which are the basic building blocks for their life narrative. The chronology and causality are destroyed as is the ability for interpreting and understanding the meaning of the events. Traumatic experiences also shatter a person's life narrative and integrity by challenging the frames, norms and rules one has taken for granted and believed in or it calls into question the patterns and themes along which one has constructed one's plot. In other words, it destroys a person's "basic trust" (Krystal 77; Brison, *Aftermath* xii, 49-50; Erikson, *Notes* 197). "Basic trust is the foundation of belief in the continuity of life, the order of nature, and the transcendent order of the divine" (J. Herman, *Trauma* 51-52). People whose basic trust is shattered feel themselves left alone, unprotected, abandoned and disconnected from all others (J. Herman, *Trauma* 52); they face a meaningless "void" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 24).

Having lost a coherent and meaningful life narrative that offered a synthesis between discordant and concordant elements and showed a continuity from the past to the present and future, a person can but question everything s/he has already narrated and in turn may no longer be able to uphold her/his ideas, plans, or identity and continuity in life. As Tuval-Mashiach et al. claim, "[t]he healthy individual is capable of holding a coherent, meaningful, and dynamic narrative of himself [...], a person whose story is unavailable, flawed, or partial is prone to psychological and emotional difficulties" (281).

As pointed out above, trauma cannot be transformed into language and thus no meaningful discourse can grasp it or portray it. It remains an unclaimed hole in one's narrative. It is thus impossible for the traumatized person to continue her/his life. Everything is overshadowed by the traumatic event, which has become the one and only



nucleus in the traumatized person's life. The person is frozen and stagnated at this point and can neither move back nor beyond it.

Likewise, trauma seriously disturbs or destroys one's narrative identity. Usually it should contain elements from the past, present and future which are linked through our promises (i.e., mainly ipse parts) and stored in our character (i.e., mainly idem parts), but trauma interrupts this continuity and therefore may split one's identity into two apparently unrelated parts: "the self 'before' and the self 'after'" (King 3). Many traumatized people claim to be another person after the trauma and to live in two unrelated worlds at the same time (van der Kolk and van der Hart 176; Brison, *Trauma Narratives* 39; *Aftermath* 38). This phenomenon is called "dissociation". Unable to integrate the traumatic memories, the traumatized person splits her/his personality so that some parts are cut off and stored separately in a parallel consciousness of another self (van der Kolk and van der Hart 168; Antze 7; Mollon 7; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 53). This enables the person to develop an identity and maintain some of their beliefs and schemas (van der Kolk, van der Hart and Marmar 317), but their development as well as their life narrative are interrupted and put to a halt nevertheless. Lifton (Caruth, *Interview* 137) emphasizes that one has to re-establish the continuity from past to present and future and therefore this traumatized 'second self' has to be linked to one's old self and both need to be integrated into one's life narrative.

Trauma also destroys one's capacity to act as an agent, because it leaves a person overwhelmed, powerless and out of control (Brison, *Aftermath* 59-60; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 24, 26-27); without any plot and therefore without goals or guidelines. Especially when people have been reduced to passive, depersonalized objects during their traumatization, they may come to 'murder' their real self (Mollon 44-45) and adopt a fixed "subject-position" (LaCapra, *History* 12), i.e., they partially reduce their self, e.g., to the role of a victim or perpetrator and which they totally incorporate and re-enact during the revival of the trauma. As a result they may no longer believe in an alteration of their role and identity.

According to Brison, "the self is both autonomous and socially dependent" (*Aftermath* 38) and thus by destroying one's notion of self and one's narrative, trauma also damages

one's means to interact with others and the capability to form and maintain relationships (J. Herman, *Trauma* 53; Mollon 47; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 27). One starts to doubt oneself, others and the meaningfulness of the world and consequently resigns from interaction with others.

Traumatized people also often shy away from others, because they suffer from "survivor guilt" (J. Herman, *Trauma* 53; Caruth, *Interview* 138; Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 54). They feel guilty because they have survived while others did not and unable to find excuses or absolution for this, they can fall into a serious crisis. They may feel anxious to start a new life or to form new relationships, because they believe it would be a betrayal of those who died (LaCapra, *History* 200).

### **3.2.3 The Urge to tell and the Wish to forget**

There is a natural mechanism to repress everything that hurts or frightens us, and traumatized people, afraid of the trauma's uncontrollable and destructive power, decide consciously or unconsciously to 'forget' painful memories (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 32; Herman, *Trauma* 47; Mollon 84). However traumas "'cry out' for articulation even if they are not fully grasped, or indeed known, by those who experience them" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 30). Despite trauma's destructive impact on one's life narrative and identity, people feel an urge to try to narrate what happened to them and to make sense of it and integrate it into their life narrative (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 6-7). The paradox is thus that "[v]ictims want to forget because remembering reopens the wound of trauma; at the same time, they want to remember because silence is unbearable" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 32)<sup>52</sup>.

However, even if one has decided to fulfil this urge to tell one's traumatic experiences, it is very hard for a traumatized person to put them into words and communicate them understandably to others; as van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela put it: "the problem for the traumatised person in narrating what has happened, in a language comprehensible for the non-traumatised" (66).

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<sup>52</sup> See also Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (2) or Huber (*Teil I* 69).

Dealing with trauma is uncomfortable, even painful, and it always questions one's beliefs and values (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 74). Most problematic are those cases when one's traumatic experiences or memories involve cultural taboos (cf. Etherington 30). Thus others either pretend it never happened, assess trauma's impact wrongly or refuse to acknowledge it properly, because they fear that the trauma will unsettle their beliefs and peace (McFarlane and van der Kolk 27; Brison, *Aftermath* x, 57; J. Herman, *Complex PTSD* 93).

Faced with communities' or societies' wish to forget or even resistance, a person succumbs to the appeal not to speak and represses the trauma (McFarlane and van der Kolk 31; J. Herman, *Trauma* 8). Especially the fear of meeting with disbelief or being misunderstood often prevents trauma victims from narrating their experiences (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 2), which however leaves them alone in their suffering. Actually, a person's trauma may not only result from her/his inability to produce a narrative that incorporates the important experiences, but likewise from a restriction to tell her/his own narrative; one is then thus entangled in the dominant narrative of the society that one cannot even develop a personal interpretation of it (McFarlane and van der Kolk 27; White and Epston 28-29).

### 3.3 THE CASE OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was a devastating and traumatic period. According to van Alphen (26-27) it evades any kind of understanding or forms of transforming it into discourse and thus it can neither be claimed nor integrated into a narrative.

This impossibility to narrate one's experiences already began during the Holocaust (van Alphen 27). Its uniqueness is, according to Laub (*Truth and Testimony* 65-66; *Event Without Witness* 80-81)<sup>53</sup>, that it was an event without witnesses<sup>54</sup>. One generally bears witness to the truth of an event and records it as such in one's memory. However, the cruelty and the horror of what was taking place surpassed any imagination and made it

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<sup>53</sup> See also LaCapra (*History* 220).

<sup>54</sup> Caruth extends this impossibility of bearing witness to all trauma, since she argues that one can never grasp their meaning and the difficult task of a listener is thus "to listen to departure" (*Introduction I* 10).

impossible for observer, perpetrator and witness to step out of the overwhelming actuality and become an objective and unaffected witness.

The inmates (as well as the perpetrators) were made to believe that what they were experiencing was justified (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 66-67) and thus they were caught up in an ideology that destroyed their humanness and annihilated their self and their life narrative (van Alphen 33). (Even after the war victims sometimes secretly believed in the correctness of the cruelties (Krystal 83)). Since the inmates of the concentration camps were treated as mere objects, as “*figuren*” (Felman, *The Return* 210)<sup>55</sup>, they were denied to develop their subjectivity and agency (van Alphen 30) or ethical values and norms. Everything receded into the background of mere survival, but at the same time the inmates had hardly any hope for a future, and this made the construction or continuation of a life narrative likewise impossible (Rothberg 161). Furthermore, they had nobody to turn to, no listener who would understand them (Laub, *Event Without Witness* 82)<sup>56</sup>.

After the war the victims still had no frames, no language to express or to work through their experiences and give them meaning. They existed in a “narrative vacuum” (van Alphen 33). Holocaust victims therefore often state that they felt themselves belonging to a sort of “secret order” (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 67; *Event Without Witness* 82) who must keep their traumatic experiences safely sealed, because “the rest of the world will never come to know the *real* truth, the one that involved the destruction of their humanity” (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 67).

Only after a considerably amount of time witnessing was possible. Especially those who were not entangled in this system of secrets, e.g., the second generation, started to ask questions about the traumatic experiences of their parents (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 68). Among other critics<sup>57</sup>, LaCapra thus claims that the Holocaust is also an event experienced belatedly (*History and Memory* 9) only to be grasped and transmitted after some time.

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<sup>55</sup> See also Michaels (*FP* 165-166).

<sup>56</sup> For an elaborate discussion of this inability to bear witness see Felman (*The Return* 228-231).

<sup>57</sup> For example Friedländer (126) and Laub (*Event Without Witness* 84; *Truth and Testimony* 69).

## **4 FUGITIVE PIECES AND THE WINTER VAULT: NOVELS ABOUT TRAUMA**

This section deals with Anne Michaels's two novels as texts about trauma. Williams and Polatinsky already claimed that "[i]f fiction provides a creative opportunity for thinking and writing about trauma when theory stumbles or is confronted by the enormity of its apparently unrealisable task, Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* [and *The Winter Vault* as well] offers an apt illustrative instance of the complexities entailed in seeking to imagine the traumatic" (6) and indeed, her novels feature traumatized characters and numerous traumatic experiences and events.

The sources for traumatization are therefore different and either on a personal level (like loss) or collective one (like the Holocaust). Generally speaking, the protagonists of both novels are traumatized in multiple ways and at different stages in their lives and they suffer from the typical characteristics of trauma, like haunting memories, intrusive flashbacks and re-enactments, unclaimed voids or the "crisis of truth", but some of them also develop persistent fears, notorious habits and fractured personalities, an inability to transform and communicate their trauma or to form attached relationships. As a result they are isolated, excluded and lonely, which makes their recovery and reconnection to others especially difficult.

In the following, the sources and effects of the characters' traumas are discussed, which have a crucial impact on their lives and thus also on the story of the novel. Consequently, some interesting elements of the portrayal of trauma on the discourse level are briefly investigated.

### **4.1 FUGITIVE PIECES**

#### **4.1.1 Jakob**

##### *The "primal scene"*

Jakob Beer experiences the disruption of his life narrative and his identity at the early age of seven through the sudden loss of his family, his friends and his home. He is forced to become an ear-witness of his parents' brutal murder and upon emerging from

his hiding place discovers that his sister has disappeared without any trace. Within minutes after these dreadful events he has to flee from the burning house and his hometown. According to critics (Anker 50; Cook 14) this is the “primal scene” that triggers his trauma.

Even years later, when he describes it in his memoirs (which are written after he has found consolation and healing in his marriage to Michaela), one can still guess from the way of its presentation to what degree the event was traumatizing for the child:

The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under the shouts. Noises never heard before, torn from my father’s mouth. Then silence. My mother had been sewing a button on my shirt. She kept her buttons in a chipped saucer. I heard the rim of the saucer in circles on the floor. I heard the spray of buttons, little white teeth. [...] I ran and fell, ran and fell. Then the river: so cold it felt sharp. The river was the same blackness that was inside me; only the thin membrane of my skin kept me floating. From the other bank, I watched darkness turn to purple-orange light above the town; the colour of flesh transforming to spirit. They flew up. The dead passed above me, weird haloes and arcs smothering the stars. (Michaels, *FP* 7)<sup>58</sup>

The rash rhythm of the passage mirrors Jakob’s desperate flight. The memories are mere bits and pieces which are told in short, abrupt sentences. They are distorted, fragmented and full of sensual impressions (the sounds of the saucer and buttons, the cold river). Only later, in the course of writing his memoirs, he inserts some more details which could be belated recollections: “They remained in their seats as they’d planned they would, if it came to that. The soldiers pushed my father over in his chair” (Michaels, *FP* 106). Jakob’s memories are thus clearly traumatic, i.e., too horrible to be consciously claimed, understood or transformed into narrative memory.

When his psyche fails to evaluate and react to the traumatic events, Jakob’s instincts take over the control of his body and he flees like a madman. Only in time does he realize the amount of his loss and, confronted with the loneliness and hopelessness of his situation, Jakob stagnates. Although he continues to run, he has no longer any strength to believe in a future or to see any meaning in his life and sometimes even considers drowning himself (Michaels, *FP* 11). Even later in Greece, Jakob still wishes to “take on

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<sup>58</sup> One could of course argue that Jakob as a poet deliberately chose this way to narrate his trauma.

the pattern of the rug or the bedcover, so [he] could disappear simply by stillness” (Michaels, *FP* 18).

The persistence of this attitude even after his miraculous rescue suggests that Jakob’s life narrative has been severely shattered and therefore also his identity. Through the loss of his family and his move to Greece he has become totally uprooted and as a result all the plans, the dreams and wishes, the prospects for the future he had can no longer be fulfilled. For example, his friend Mones and he had sworn to each other that “[they] would open a bookshop together [...] [they] would be pious like [their] fathers. [They] would marry the Gotkin sisters and share a summer house at Lasosna. [...] [Their] first sons will be born the same year!” (Michaels, *FP* 72-73); but Mones is forever gone. To formulate it in Ricoeur’s terms, Jakob can no longer keep these promises, and thus the future he created for himself is unavailable. There is a huge hole in his life with nothing beyond it and in which all former strands end. Moreover, there is no continuity left, no “character” to be traced; Jakob has lost his plot and with it the meaning and purpose in his life. This void is sometimes even obvious to others: Athos, e.g., says to him: “Sometimes I can’t look you in the eye; you’re like a building that’s burned out inside, with the outer walls still standing” (Michaels, *FP* 30).

Jakob himself is also aware of this disruption of his self and his life narrative, but he sees no way out of this situation: “To survive was to escape fate. But if you escape your fate, whose life do you then step into?” (Michaels, *FP* 48). For a long time Jakob therefore has two selves, the one before and the one after his parents were murdered, between which he moves back and forth (e.g., when he is at Kostas and Daphne’s the memories of his past self interchange with the experiences of his present one (Michaels, *FP* 64-65)). Anker also sees Jakob as “split and dissociated” (58). For the rest of his life he will struggle to combine the self of his childhood with the self he slowly develops under Athos’s care.

### ***The traumatic living conditions during the war***

Apart from this primal scene that disrupts his life narrative, Jakob is further traumatized through the living conditions during World War II. There are the usual troubles like constant hunger, which affects especially the still growing child and makes Athos sick

with worry (Michaels, *FP* 37). To survive they even go to the lengths of using “Pliny’s *Natural History* as a cookbook” (Michaels, *FP* 38).

The most disturbing consequence of the living conditions during the war is however Jakob’s development of a constant fear. It begins with his flight from the burning house of his patents, during which he only walks at night and digs his own grave for the days. Later in Athos’s house, when he learns about the violence and heartlessness of the Germans toward the Greek Jews and becomes more and more aware of what is at stake, his fear of being discovered and the resulting state of hyperarousal increase: “many times a day, I couldn’t conceive of any feeling stronger than fear” (Michaels, *FP* 19).

In other words, Jakob’s fight or flight-system is seriously disturbed. He has lost his natural ability to evaluate situations, and even for common daily tasks he has to reflect upon the potential dangers of each environment: “For years after the war, even the smallest decision was an agony. I examined my steps before I took them, even before the most trivial excursion” (Michaels, *FP* 77)<sup>59</sup>. One unforeseen circumstance or threatening detail is enough to make him panic. When he, e.g., once feels courageous enough to go out to buy some fish, a minor comprehension error (he mistakes the shopkeeper’s ‘chicken’ for ‘suspicion’) and the shopkeeper’s loud and inquisitive voice are enough to trigger his fear, and he rushes home (Michaels, *FP* 94). Only with others’ assurance of security and their companionship, Jakob slowly overcomes his fear and regains a functioning fight or flight-system.

### ***Bella’s lost story***

However, it is the loss of his sister and the ignorance about her fate that trouble Jakob the most. While he can accept the death of his parents, he cannot move beyond the ignorance about his sister’s fate (Bentley). Her unfinished narrative enlarges the void in Jakob’s life narrative. He is “[f]illed with her silence” (Michaels, *FP* 10) and in order to claim this hole at least partially, he tries to memorize her face, her hair, her voice, her habits, her laughter and wants to keep her close. Jakob cannot let her go, but carries her

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<sup>59</sup> See also J. Herman (*Trauma* 162).



within himself (Zeitlin 182; Parry 356): “Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me” (Michaels, *FP* 14)<sup>60</sup>.

This form of mourning and commemoration is however “*aberrated*” mourning (Rose 64)<sup>61</sup>. In contrast to “*inaugurated*” mourning, which gives peace to both the dead and the living, in aberrated mourning the loss has not been worked through (Rose 64). The dead ones have not received a proper burial, therefore there is no place for them to rest nor for the survivor to mourn them. They therefore remain as ghosts within the survivor who is in turn bound to the dead and thus cannot move on (Rose 70).

In Jakob’s case he literally cannot lay Bella to rest, and she therefore stays with him and he even deliberately lets her memory haunt him (Parry 356). These obsessive recollections of her however wear him out (Parry 357) and start to determine his life (Krote 520; Bölling 192).

### *Suffering from intrusion and elusion*

At other times, however, the way Jakob describes the recollections of his sister and his other traumatic memories, e.g., “I learned to tolerate images rising in me like bruises” (Michaels, *FP* 19), confirms Caruth’s definition that trauma is a wound that cries out. His trauma remains unclaimed for a long time, because most of the experiences he recalls are fragmented and not to be transformed into narrative memory or integrated into his life narrative (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 53). He claims that “it is my body that remembers them” (Michaels, *FP* 170) and they thus tend to come back and overwhelm him in various forms.

Jakob continually suffers from nightmares: “They waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves” (Michaels, *FP* 24, also see 44). For years such dreams disturb Jakob’s sleep and Athos, who witnesses the intrusion of these nightmares, has only the wish “to steal your memories from you while you’re sleeping” (Michaels, *FP* 92).

His memories also reappear as flashbacks – “[d]aydreams of sickening repetition – a trivial gesture remembered endlessly” (Michaels, *FP* 24). They surface suddenly and are

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<sup>60</sup> With regard to this formulation Estrin (287) even claims that Jakob becomes symbolically pregnant with Bella.

<sup>61</sup> See also Parry (esp. 355) for a discussion of aberrated mourning in *Fugitive Pieces*.

often triggered by similar scenes or sensory stimuli. When he stays for example with Athos at Kostas and Daphne's, their actions bring back memories of his former life in Poland:

Daphne [...] was pouring me a glass of milk. ...Mrs. Alperstein, Mones's mother, made wigs. She used to rub her hands with lotion to keep them smooth for her work. She gave us milk while we were studying and the glass always smelled of lotion, it made the milk taste pretty. (Michaels, *FP* 64)

Or, when he walks the streets of Toronto at night and "a thread of memory clung to a thought. Suddenly an overheard word fastened in to a melody; a song of my mother's [...]. The words stumbled out of my mouth, a whisper, then louder, until I was mumbling whatever I remembered" (Michaels, *FP* 109)<sup>62</sup>.

The vividness of these memories does not decrease despite the temporal distance. Even when Jakob writes them down in his memoirs near the end of his life, they remain accurate as if they would happen in the here and now:

The first Easter in hiding, at the midnight climax of the Anastasimi Mass, I watched from the window in Athos's study. [...] With my forehead against the glass, I watched and was in my own village, winter evenings, my teachers lighting the wicks of our lanterns [...]. Mones swinging his arms, his lamp skimming the ground, his white breath glowing from below. I watched the Easter procession and placed this parallel image, like other ghostly double exposures, carefully into orbit. On an inner shelf too high to reach. Even now, half a century later, writing this on a different Greek island, I look down to the remote lights of town and feel the heat of a lamp spreading up my sleeve. (Michaels, *FP* 18)

This triggered reliving of the past as present is a typical feature of traumatic memory and indeed, "[t]hroughout Jakob's narrative the image of double exposure recurs: the present exists as an echo of the past, the past is always a shadow behind the present moment" (King 142)<sup>63</sup>. Jakob who becomes aware of this fact describes it by claiming that "[e]very moment is two moments" (Michaels, *FP* 140).

For a long time Jakob tries to avoid these intrusive flashbacks and memories. He wants "to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words, with Athos's stories, with all the geologic eras" (Michaels, *FP* 93) and fails; partly because he is willing to let

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of this quote within the context of migration see Criglington (92-93).

<sup>63</sup> See also Kandiyoti (315).

them intrude, “trying to use up a lifetime of love in the last second” (Michaels, *FP* 19) and to preserve the only thing that is left from them.

Within this context, Jakob also experiences the unreliability of memory, even suffers from this so-called “crisis of truth”. According to Zeitlin, in *Fugitive Pieces* “the texture of memory is shown as elliptical, often fragmentary, tantalizingly elusive, inscribed on the body, and favoring nonverbal signals in the recording of sensations, such as sight, touch, smell, sound” (177-178) and as such hard to claim. Jakob further observes that as long as he tries to avoid them, the memories come back in all their accuracy. However, as soon as he tries to claim them, they become blurred: “I tried to remember ordinary details, the sheet music beside Bella’s bed, her dresses. What my father’s workshop looked like. But in nightmares the real picture wouldn’t hold still long enough for me to look, everything melting” (Michaels, *FP* 25).

Jakob subsequently also suffers from a “crisis of witnessing”. His parents and his sister haunt him, because he cannot bear witness to what happened to them; he cannot tell their stories (King 120) and thus has to carry them unclaimed inside himself (Cook 14). He feels “[t]hat my life could not be stored in any language but only in silence” (Michaels, *FP* 111), because the scenes he heard are to some degree not representable. He says himself: “I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound” (Michaels, *FP* 17). He cannot transform and integrate those events into his narrative, because something is always missing. He may imagine what happened, but then he can never be sure about the truth. He thus cannot integrate one of the nuclei into his life narrative and his deliberate return to and constant repetition of what he heard the night his family was murdered, in the hope to retrieve at least another detail and to recall other memories, leads to a traumatizing obsession with the past (Zeitlin 182; Krote 520).

### ***The Jewish legacy***

Jakob does not only experience the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust personally, but also on a collective level. As a Jew he automatically belongs to the Jewish community and thus represents their joint suffering during the Holocaust. There is a correspondence with Halbwach’s theory of collective memory insofar that Jakob

cannot but integrate his own experiences and memories into the larger collective frame (King 143)<sup>64</sup>.

Even before the murder of his family, Jakob experiences the German occupants' tendency to degrade Jews to worthless objects and from his comments on how his parents planned to behave when the Germans came for them, one can guess that among the Jews of his hometown there was some awareness of the fate that awaited them. It is therefore no wonder that upon encountering Athos in the ruins of Biskupin Jakob identifies himself as "dirty Jew" (Michaels, *FP* 13). After days of hiding in the woods, he is ready to deliver himself to the mercy of a stranger. According to Gubar, Jakob "names himself in a libel circulated to exterminate him; his self-definition proves that the sole terms at his disposal have been poisoned by the lethal culture that classified and thereby attempted to eradicate him" (*Empathic Identification* 256-257).

The relation between Jakob's experiences during the war and the collective suffering of the European Jews is further made a subject in the novel. In Greece he sees his own experiences re-enacted by the Jews of Zakynthos. Through overhearing conversations, Jakob learns that they likewise had to leave their homes and lost friends and relatives. Those who managed to escape now search for a hiding place in the hills and entrust their lives upon nature (Michaels, *FP* 40); similar to Jakob, who chose to dig his own grave every day during his flight. According to Kandiyoti (311), his hiding in the bog also echoes partly the life in the concentration camps and although Jakob has never been in a concentration camp himself, he can access them through collective memory<sup>65</sup>.

There is nothing to be done to protect him from the knowledge of these cruelties, because "he's already heard so much" (Michaels, *FP* 43). Jakob has experienced them as a witness and victim; the trauma of his people is already inscribed in his own life. Later, when the information about the atrocities and the life in the concentration camps reaches the public, he starts to see his personal experiences in a larger context and tries to integrate them into the collective ones.

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<sup>64</sup> Halbwach's theory is also used by Verwaayen in his discussion of Michaels's *Miner's Pond*.

<sup>65</sup> See also the discussion of "postmemory" further down.

His fortunate rescue and survival result in Jakob experiencing survivor guilt<sup>66</sup>. He is glad and thankful to be alive and also acknowledges that he could not have known about these atrocities. However, especially after he has learnt to which extent Jews really suffered while he was quite safe under Athos's care, this feeling of guilt increases:

While I hid in the radiant light of Athos's island, thousands suffocated in darkness. While I hid in the luxury of a room, thousands were stuffed into baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins. [...] While I was living with Athos on Zakynthos, learning Greek and English, learning geology, geography, and poetry, Jews were filling the corners and cracks of Europe, every available space. [...] I didn't know that while I listened to the stories of explorers in the clean places of the world (snow-covered, salt-stung) and slept in a clean place, men were untangling limbs, the flesh of friends and neighbours, wives and daughters, coming off in their hands. (Michaels, *FP* 45-46)

As many other survivors, Jakob also struggles under "the burdensome legacy of the inaudible silences, echoing from the inner walls of the gas chambers, whose text we will never hear" (Langer 197). His personal void is thus reflected in the gap left in the collective memory of his people<sup>67</sup>. According to Neumann (102) it is a great achievement to continue living after having witnessed the death of others, but he also claims that one will never be free from this trauma and will constantly feel an urge to commemorate those who are dead. Jakob therefore always feels that his survival left him with a duty to remember and mourn the dead, to tell their stories and to bear witness to their suffering. Like the prisoners who dug up the mass graves he has his "hands full of names" (Michaels, *FP* 52). His representation of all Jewish people and their collective trauma is enhanced by his name, since Jakob actually shares it with the biblical patriarch of the Jewish people (Hillger 34; Krote 522).

Jakob however does not know "[h]ow [...] one man [can] take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each?" (Michaels, *FP* 52). The only way to tell their stories would be through imagination and proxy-witnessing, but this could lead to a distortion of the truth. On the one hand, he thus faces a duty he cannot fulfil, but, on the other hand, he cannot let it go and this disunity is likewise traumatizing.

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<sup>66</sup> Also in Krote (519) and Parry (357).

<sup>67</sup> Omhové (85) links this gap in the Jewish history to the destruction of landscape by natural catastrophes; an image often used in *Fugitive Pieces*.

### *A social outcast?*

Finally, because of his traumatic memories, their effects on his everyday life and this self-inflicted duty, Jakob, as many survivors, fears that he might be misunderstood and that his trauma will not be accepted: “I imagined kissing the girl I saw in the library [...] but then she wants to know why I live with Athos, why I’ve collected all those articles about the war that are in piles on the carpet, why I stay up half the night examining every face in the photographs” (Michaels, *FP* 110). After Athos’s death, which leaves Jakob devastated and lonely (Michaels, *FP* 114), he therefore withdraws into isolation.

Later he also fails to form a functioning relationship with his first wife Alex, because it is overshadowed by his inability to let Bella go (Hillger 36). However, Alex may actually fear his trauma and thus rather makes him repress than narrate it.

To conclude, Jakob suffers from various effects of traumatization, all more or less inflicted by the murder of his parents, the disappearance of his beloved sister, his forced flight and loss of home and his Jewish legacy. His life narrative and identity are disturbed and split. As a result, he suffers from haunting nightmares, flashbacks and re-enactments, is frightened and has difficulties to connect to others. However, despite his isolation and partial stagnation, Jakob tries to come to terms with his trauma, as will be shown later.

#### **4.1.2 Athos**

Athos, Jakob’s foster parent and mentor, is also a traumatized character, and it is perhaps because he knows too well how it feels to lose someone beloved that he is able to help Jakob to move on and to reformulate his life narrative.

The reader gets to know only a few details about Athos’s past and his traumatic experiences. He has lost his brother Nikolaos in a traffic accident and shortly afterwards his mother died from illness (Michaels, *FP* 26), leaving Athos and his father alone and “inconsolable” (Michaels, *FP* 27). This sadness even increases when Athos loses his wife Helen during World War I, a loss so traumatic that he never speaks about it,

because, as Kostas phrases it, “[s]ome stones are so heavy only silence helps to carry them” (Michaels, *FP* 77). In other words, Athos cannot claim and translate it into language.

Like Jakob, Athos also experiences the loss of home. During the war, he has to witness the corruption and destruction of his country and its society (Michaels, *FP* 60-61). Later, when he immigrates to Canada, he has to leave behind his beloved “broken hills of his country, mended by groves and sheep. He carried in his wallet a photo of the hilltop view from the house on Zakynthos” (Michaels, *FP* 82) and with it he also leaves some part of his identity behind. However, he already knows that “if you learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another” (Michaels, *FP* 82).

Athos thus knows that one can recover from trauma and this also shows his strength: Despite all these losses and occasional depressions (Michaels, *FP* 103), he never gives in. Athos still carries on. He “is like his beloved limestone. The sea will dissolve him into caves, dig holes into him, but he lasts and lasts” (Michaels, *FP* 78).

The most haunting trauma for Athos is however the fate of his fellow workers at Biskupin. Since the archaeological findings at that site did not support Nazi ideology of genealogy and civilization, Biskupin was destroyed and the archaeologists either killed or sent to Dachau. Athos, who had found Jakob and fled with him to Greece, escaped. He takes it as his fate that he saved Jakob, but he also feels survivor guilt. To come to terms with this trauma and to fulfil his self-imposed duty to make the public aware of the Nazi’s falsification of archaeological sites, he writes a book in dedication to his lost comrades called “*Bearing False Witness*, which [however] he knew somehow he would never finish, a debt left unpaid to his colleagues at Biskupin” (Michaels, *FP* 103). At least this of Athos’s trauma thus remains partly unclaimed and haunts him until the end of his life.

#### **4.1.3 Ben’s Parents**

Ben’s parents also belong to the Jewish community, but in contrast to Jakob they experienced the full horrors of the Holocaust. Little is known about the exact sources for the trauma(s), but one can infer them from their own hints about their life in the ghetto

and concentration camps from Ben's comments or, of course, from one's own collective knowledge about the Holocaust.

Because they apparently heard Liuba Levitska singing in the ghetto (Michaels, *FP* 240), it can be assumed that they were forced into the Vilna ghetto and were then deported into different concentration camps. According to Ben, his father was interned near Heiligenstadt, witnessing death and torture and suffering from hunger and thirst, the hard work, the unbearable living conditions and the sadism of the guards, until he managed to escape via a tunnel dug with spoons and joined a group of partisans (Michaels, *FP* 216-217). After the war, he was then (miraculously) reunited with his wife and, having lost everything dear to them, they immigrated to Canada. However, they took their traumatic memories and experiences with them, which left obvious traces in their personalities, beliefs and habits (Howells 110; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 54).

### *Surviving the Holocaust?*

They never could leave the war and the Holocaust behind. Their past hangs like a shadow over their lives and they relate everything to it. When Ben, e.g., tells his mother about a tornado that "collected mounds of apples, onions, jewellery, eyeglasses, clothing – [she just answers] 'the camp'. Enough smashed glass to cover seventeen football fields – 'Kristallnacht.' I read to her about lightning – 'the sign of the Ess Ess, Ben, on their collars'" (Michaels, *FP* 224-225).

Their traumatic experiences and memories haunt and overcome them and evoke the same fears and desperation as in the actual situations. In their case, trauma keeps indeed the unclaimed and overwhelming character Caruth describes. They cannot transform their traumas into a coherent narrative, because the memories are always emotionally loaded, fragmented, experienced without any distance and thus beyond any control. In the example above, Ben's mother can only utter single words or phrases that point toward a longer story she however cannot narrate. She can give Ben just "a coded account of the Holocaust she has witnessed generalized to encompass all acts of nature, all frequencies of violence" (Cook 23-24).

Their past and the unclaimed traumas also determine their life in Toronto. Their emigration did not offer them new perspectives, but was rather "a continuation of the



past and a perpetuation of the legacy of pain and suffering” (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 55). They live in a constant fear that the peace and comfort they experience in Canada is just momentary and that the horrors of the Holocaust will return and this makes it impossible for them to integrate or assimilate into the Canadian society. For instance, on observing “that most of their fellow immigrants settled in the same downtown district [...] [Ben’s] father would not make the same mistake. ‘They wouldn’t even have the trouble of rounding us up.’” (Michaels, *FP* 243). They rather chose to remain strangers and outsiders (Bölling 179).

Even when their life is in danger, they resign from the help of others. During the flood of 1954, for example, they leave their house at the last moment, although the neighbours “banged at the door and shouted at us to leave” (Michaels, *FP* 247). Of course, this incident triggered former traumatic memories and their fear to go through persecution and torture again<sup>68</sup>. Similar to Laub’s (*Bearing Witness* 67) observations of actual Holocaust survivors, they asked themselves: “Who dares to believe he will be saved twice?” (Michaels, *FP* 247) Their one and only aim is to be overlooked (Michaels, *FP* 244), to disappear in order to live. This is also the reason why they are even happy to exchange their destroyed house for an apartment in a block of flats where “all the front doors look alike” (Michaels, *FP* 247)<sup>69</sup>.

For little Ben his parent’s behaviour is not comprehensible (Zeitlin 188). Neither does he understand that some aspects of everyday life are painful or difficult for his parents<sup>70</sup>. To see her husband and son leave in the morning is torture to Ben’s mother, since she fears that they will never return (Michaels, *FP* 229). She herself hardly ever leaves the house and if she does, she “[prepares] carefully. She [carries the] passports and citizenship papers in her purse” (Michaels, *FP* 229) and keeps a packed suitcase in her closet for any case (Michaels, *FP* 250). When Ben decides to move out, this is another traumatizing moment for her and he rightly observes that “[m]y efforts to free myself had created a deeper harm” (Michaels, *FP* 231). Indeed, “something was lost between us, irrevocably” (Michaels, *FP* 230). Because of her experiences during the war (she

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<sup>68</sup> Kestenberg (90) likewise mentions survivors’ often unmotivated fear of future persecution and resulting suspicion of the society they live in.

<sup>69</sup> See also Bölling (179) for a discussion of this episode in the novel.

<sup>70</sup> Compare this to Jakob’s fear of leaving the house.

probably has witnessed how children turned in their parents as it is also described in *The Winter Vault* (Michaels, *TWV* 267)), Ben's mother grows afraid of her own son and starts to withhold information and to reduce their intimacy as if she would mistrust his loyalty (Michaels, *FP* 231). Ben, of course, feels this estrangement and he grows depressed and listless, "[feeling] I had expended all my energy walking out my parents' front door" (Michaels, *FP* 232).

Ben's father is also over-precautious and although he goes out to work, he is even more withdrawn than his wife. Ben describes him as "a man who had erased himself as much as possible within the legal limits of citizenship" (Michaels, *FP* 232). For him, the danger of Nazism and extermination is not over; he still sees himself in the 'subject-position' of a persecuted Jew. As J. Herman (*Trauma* 92) claims, this fear that the danger and the perpetrators are still present and just waiting to attack again makes it impossible to see the reality and one's identity as altered from what it was during the traumatization and, as Erikson adds, "[o]nce persons who have been visited by trauma begin to look around them, evidence that the world is a place of unrelenting danger seems to appear everywhere" (*Notes* 195). Therefore, Ben's father dreads offices and it is only through an enormous effort that he decides to apply for his seniors' pension. As bad luck will have it, he encounters an anti-Semitic clerk<sup>71</sup> who dismisses him claiming that he does not have the right papers (Michaels, *FP* 232-233). Shocked that his fears are indeed well-grounded, he locks himself up for hours. For Ben, who is indirectly blamed for taking things too easily and having made his father apply for his pension, this is another incident he does not understand.

### *Victims or Weirdoes?*

Their behaviour as well as their attitude, which appears to be thus weird to their son and probably also to others, can however be explained by the dehumanizing living conditions and the traumatic experiences they suffered from in the ghetto and the camps<sup>72</sup>. As pointed out, the interns of concentration camps were treated and in time started to perceive themselves as valueless objects (Frankl, *Ja zum Leben* 84). The re-

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<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this traumatic incident see Bentley.

<sup>72</sup> Kestenberg (98-99) mentions survivors' special preoccupation with food.

establishment of a normal life and normal beliefs was therefore incredibly hard and lengthy (Frankl, *Ja zum Leben* 145).

According to Krystal such a “state is determined by the presence of *unavoidable danger*” (80). This begins with the fear of one’s own emotions, especially happiness or joy. The survival is nothing positive, rather it is something which should not have happened. It is burdened by the guilt that so many others did not make it out alive (De Levita 90-91). Catastrophic trauma further enters every sphere of life. Victims may be incapable of planning, or acting, because even being reminded of one’s trauma is both frightening and hurtful to them. They are numbed (Krystal 80) and “[spend] most of their time ‘fighting off’ their memories” (Krystal 82), since mourning is too painful (Krystal 87). Total exclusion of emotions, however, lets them lose their self and makes them additionally incapable of any personal or social interaction.

Ben’s parents face exactly these difficulties; they are physically and mentally numbed. According to Frankl (*Ja zum Leben* 41, 51-52), in order to protect oneself against the experiences in the camps it was necessary to become numbed to any emotions. All instincts and drives were minimized to a primitive level, e.g., the satisfaction of one’s hunger (Frankl, *Ja zum Leben* 53). This also explains the way Ben’s parents treat food:

My mother kept food in her purse. My father ate frequently to avoid the first twists of hunger because, once they gripped him, he’d eat until he was sick. Then he ate dutifully, methodically, tears streaming down his face, animal and spirit in such raw evidence, knowing he was degrading both. [...] There was no pleasure, for my father, associated with food. (Michaels, *FP* 214)

Similar to their approach to food, they have an extraordinary attitude towards everything else, which also results from their traumatization in the camps. As Ben comments: “When my parents were liberated, four years before I was born, they found that the ordinary world outside the camp had been eradicated. There was no more simple meal, no thing was less than extraordinary [...] There was no ordinariness to return to” (Michaels, *FP* 205)<sup>73</sup>. Everything normal, along with their selves and their basic trust is shattered and they can hardly believe that the suffering and humiliations are over. To young Ben this fascination and devotion to the most ordinary things is however

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<sup>73</sup> See also Frankl (*Ja zum Leben* 117).

sometimes unbearable. He speaks of his “mother’s painful love for the world” (Michaels, *FP* 223).

### *Losses*

Ben’s parents have also experienced numerous losses that led to their trauma. Ben, e.g., knows that they lost relatives, their home and culture. After Hurricane Hazel, which destroyed half of Toronto he thus comments that “one might say, my parents were fortunate, for they didn’t lose the family silverware or important letters or heirlooms however humble. They had already lost those things” (Michaels, *FP* 246). Yet, he knows little about their more traumatic losses.

During the war they had to face the “loss: of voice, of life, of knowledge, of awareness, of truth, of the capacity to feel, of the capacity to speak” (Felman, *The Return* 231), of meaning and of hope and thus also lost the ability to form their life narrative and identity. After one learns that they also lost their two little children, one finally begins to understand not only their behaviour and their fears but also to what extent their personality and life narrative has been destroyed. As Krystal (84) argues, the loss of a child may be the one thing that is impossible to accept and integrate and indeed, this experience traumatized Ben’s parents to such an extent that they are no longer able to behave like normal parents. They can no longer show attachment to their third child; signs of love are always intermingled with their sadness of having once lost children and the fear of losing yet another one. Their mourning is aberrated and they never have the strength to lay the dead to rest and to move beyond their death. Parry confirms this by stating: “Both parents are unable to melt into grief; their suffering is a prison in which mourning is locked and without its processes they are unable to let the dead go. [...] Where there should have been [...] a process of ritually mourning the dead” (358) there was silence.

In contrast to Jakob, who gradually succeeds to overcome his fear and starts to interact and form relationships to others, Ben’s parents shy away from every attempt. Because of their horrible experiences, their losses and their inability to claim, mourn and narrate them, they remain stagnated in their trauma. They cannot re-establish a feeling of safety,

nor their basic trust; they are numbed and thus incapable to show emotions or take any action. They know that their trauma is too horrible to be known or acknowledged by society or even their son and thus hush it up. Especially after they are confirmed in their fears, they only wish to disappear, to withdraw into isolation.

Ben's parents are able to support each other, but they fail to explain their trauma or behaviour to their son or show him the love they actually feel towards him and thus their habits are simply disturbing and embarrassing to him.

#### **4.1.4 Ben**

Ben grows up in a traumatizing environment created through his parents' unspoken and un-integrated trauma (King 141). How traumatizing the constant presence of the war and its past horrors is, gets obvious when Ben compares his childhood with an average one: "Instead of hearing about ogres, trolls, witches, I heard disjointed references to kapos, haftlings, 'Ess Ess', dark woods; a pyre of dark words" (Michaels, *FP* 217). He is denied to develop feelings of security or basic trust or to see and believe in a general goodness of the world. Instead he is always aware of the frightening and potentially dangerous aspects of things. Those are certainly unhealthy living conditions for a child.

#### ***Preparing for the worst***

Although born after the Holocaust, Ben's constant and strong awareness of it results in his traumatization (Bölling 178-180). Like his parents, he fears its return and consequently spends a lot of time preparing for the worst case. In order to ensure his survival he e.g. takes his parents' mantras<sup>74</sup> like "those with a trade had a better chance of survival" (Michaels, *FP* 225) seriously and spends his free time "[raiding] the 'Pageant of Knowledge' series" (Michaels, *FP* 225). Moreover, Ben's life is full of habits, attitudes or patterns of behaviour resulting from his parents' wartime experiences. He does not understand most of them and this leads to a myriad of traumatic experiences and memories which haunt him even in his adulthood. The following example shows how intrusive and un-integrated these memories are:

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<sup>74</sup> Rosenthal (72) speaks about "Leitmotive", like "Lernen ist das Wichtigste", which were handed down as the most important guidelines to the children.

The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens. My father found the apple in the garbage. It was rotten and I'd thrown it out – I was eight or nine. He fished it from the bin, sought me in my room, grabbed me tight by the shoulder, and pushed the apple to my face.

‘What is this? What is it?’

‘An apple -’

[...]

‘An apple! Well, my smart son, is an apple food?’

‘It was all rotten –’

[...]

‘Is an apple food?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you throw away food? You – my son – you throw away food?’

‘It’s rotten -’

‘Eat it.... Eat it!’

‘Pa, it’s rotten – I won’t’

He pushed it into my teeth until I opened my jaw. Struggling, sobbing, I ate. Its brown taste, oversweetness, tears. Years later, living on my own, if I threw out leftovers or left food on my plate in a restaurant, I was haunted by pathetic cartoon scraps in my sleep. (Michaels, *FP* 213-218)

The form in which this incident is portrayed reminds one of the disrupted and haunting character of traumatic memory. Firstly, Ben’s account of it interrupts his description of family trips and his father’s love for music, which points towards the tendency of trauma to come back suddenly and as uncontrolled and emotionally loaded memory. The latter becomes even more obvious in the way Ben narrates how he was forced to eat the rotten apple. The recollection of the incident is full of sensual impressions, but at the same time the dialogue was preserved in its accuracy. The experience was furthermore thus disturbing that it is triggered even years later by similar actions or situations. Estrin also comments that “[l]ike the scraps of food he rejects, the fragmented experience keeps impinging on his consciousness. He is bound to the story” (287) which comes back intrusively and unaltered.

Another aspect that results from Ben’s awareness of his parents sufferings during the Holocaust is that he feels the duty to protect them from further misery and harm and

tries to please them as well as he can (cf. Neumann 108). He however becomes increasingly frustrated when he fails again and again. Witnessing how they take pleasure in the daily necessities or little things makes Ben feel unloved in the end (cf. Michaels, *FP* 219). As he grows up, his initial pride for his parents' survival is slowly erased by his growing anger against them and their numbness and his helplessness to arouse them (cf. De Levita 98-99). Together with the misunderstandings of their habits this is what gradually estranges him from his parents (Bölling 180-181). In time this lack of bonding will also lead to Ben's difficulties to uphold a relationship based on love and trust; one could even claim that he has some kind of "**Bindungsstörung**" (Huber, *Teil I* 101)<sup>75</sup>. Especially when he learns about Naomi's betrayal, he starts to sabotage their marriage. His trauma has "produced an inability to trust anybody and a wilful carelessness that is turned inwards to himself and outwards to those who care for him" (Parry 363).

### *Postmemory, Family secrets and Transgenerational Trauma*

Obviously, his parents' trauma does not only trigger new traumas but is also handed down to him – through gestures, fragments of memories, habits (cf. Rosenthal 71; Schwab 286) and sometimes even on purpose:

The images my father planted in me were an exchange of vows. [...] He thrust books at me with a ferocity that frightened me, I would say now, more than the images themselves. What I was to make of them, in my safe room, was clear. You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you. (Michaels, *FP* 218-219)

Ben's mother, on the other hand, tells him in secrecy about his deceased relatives, who appear to the boy as ghosts still inhibiting the world (Michaels, *FP* 223). Therefore, Ben cannot but feel a bond to the victims of the Holocaust and he actually feels captured by history. One could speak of "postmemory", a term coined by Marianne Hirsch (in Miller and Tougaw 8)<sup>76</sup>, to describe the phenomenon of the conscious or unconscious identification with a traumatized person to such an extent that one takes over their memories and becomes haunted by their traumatic experiences as if it would be one's own past. Like other children of survivors, Ben is left "to patch a history together that [he has] never lived by using whatever props [he] can find, including photographs and

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<sup>75</sup> See also Etherington (26-29).

<sup>76</sup> See also Rossington and Whitehead (7); or De Levita (96).

stories or letters” (Schwab 281-282) or even fantasies and in this way he tries to own the traumatic past of his parents; he tries to proxy-mourn and proxy-narrate their story (Rosenthal 71). Ben therefore is a collector of all sorts of fragments (e.g., quite literally after the flood (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 63)) and he even sort of re-enacts his parents’ trauma. When they are on holiday and despite his fear of the dark, he tests his own strength and courage by “[walking] through the woods with the flashlight off until [he] reached the road, about a quarter of a mile away. If my father could walk days, miles, then I could walk at least to the road. [...] I was in training” (Michaels, *FP* 220).

Ben’s constant awareness of the past and his parent’s trauma however does not let him see the future nor is he able to create a continuity between past, present and future, because he is totally ignorant of his parents’ most traumatic experiences and losses for a long time. This leaves Ben confused and insecure about what he should do and he is thus unsuccessful in developing a meaningful life narrative and identity, which in turn has serious consequences for his adult life.

Especially “family secrets” (Kuhn 230) have such a disturbing effect on one’s life narrative. Several critics<sup>77</sup> claim that as long as they are not claimed, interpreted and integrated, they are passed on and the narratives of the following generations are haunted by their fragmented and un-integrated character. Trauma therefore can travel (Huber, *Teil I* 95) and in such cases one also speaks of transgenerational trauma. Already Jakob states: “When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation” (Michaels, *FP* 52).

The main part of Ben’s trauma is indeed his parents’ legacy (Estrin 287). It is still unclaimed and thus “[t]here was no energy of a narrative in my family, not even the fervour of an elegy. Instead, our words drifted away” (Michaels, *FP* 204). He unconsciously feels that beyond the silence there is something not articulated<sup>78</sup>. Ben

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<sup>77</sup>For example, Kuhn (231), Rosenthal (70-71), King (15), De Levita (94), LaCapra (*History and Memory* 52) and Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 53); see also Weigel (271-274).

<sup>78</sup>Schwab also confirms that usually, children feel that something is withheld from them, because it “comes in the form of moods or emotions, taking on many shapes, including grief or anxiety, hypervigilance or numbness, emotional unavailability or uncontrolled rage” (286).



knows that there is a hole left behind by an unclaimed trauma in his family's and therefore also in his narrative (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 64). For example, he claims that "[he] was born into absence" (Michaels, *FP* 233). It is this hole and the lack of communication which is fatal for Ben's narrative and identity (cf. Huber, *Teil I* 102) and since he does not know from where his trauma stems, he cannot translate and transform it. As a result, he suffers from "nightmares of doors axed open and the jagged mouths of dogs" (Michaels, *FP* 205) and is repeatedly "visited by an angel in the middle of the night" (Michaels, *FP* 205) who remains at the foot of his bed, ungraspable, but motioning to him as if he wants him to speak.

### *Everything falls into place*

After his parents' death he finally detects the truth in form of a photograph: "On the back floats a spidery date, June 1941, and two names. Hannah. Paul. I stared at both sides of the photograph a long time before I understood that there had been a daughter; and a son born just before the action" (Michaels, *FP* 252). At this moment everything gets clear (Estrin 293). The photograph, the obvious sign for the otherwise unclaimed loss of his siblings, is "like DNA" (Michaels, *FP* 251). It is the confirmation and the explanation for the trauma he has felt long before. However, this does not reduce the trauma's impact, but just throws a new light on it.

Ben suddenly realizes that he was a replacement, a compensation for the lost children. A child that was not even given a proper name – "Ben, not for Benjamin, but merely 'ben' – the Hebrew word for son" (Michaels, *FP* 253) – in the hope that it might be overlooked. According to Schwab such a "replacement child" (277) was the attempt of parents to fill the hole left behind by the loss of children and who were otherwise incapable to mourn them (Schwab 287). However, this only led to their stagnation in aberrated mourning and the child in turn faced the unattainable demand to replace an idealized sibling (De Levita 91-92) or commemorate the dead through their life (Schwab 282). They were denied to develop an individual identity and their own life narrative (Schwab 286)<sup>79</sup>. To be a replacement child is therefore definitely traumatizing. It can but fail to bring its parents happiness or please them (De Levita 90), but instead, s/he

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<sup>79</sup> See also Weigel (276).

“inherits the legacy of the sibling’s traumatic death and failed mourning” (Schwab 285). Furthermore, replacement children often suffer from survivor guilt. They feel that they were only allowed to live, because the other child(ren) had to die (Schwab 287). The dead sibling is thus always present; s/he is like a ghost that haunts the living (Schwab 284).

Ben sees that his trauma partly stems from his status as a replacement child, that he was and is haunted by his lost siblings and his parents’ inability to mourn their deaths properly. Ben is thus entrapped in aberrated mourning through the vows and promises, the secrets and unconscious hints his parents entrusted him with (Parry 358).

### *Anger and Fear*

The more shocking is it that his wife Naomi already knows this sad secret. In this very moment Ben experiences another loss; namely that his parents decided to confide in Naomi and not their son. This being “thrust out” (Michaels, *FP* 247), being again replaced, does not only hurt him and, but rouses his jealousy and anger (Michaels, *FP* 250) and leads to a serious crisis which almost destroys his marriage (Michaels, *FP* 254). He cannot understand “[b]y what right [...] Naomi [earned] their trust” (Michaels, *FP* 248), because in his opinion she who has grown up happily in Canada can never understand his family’s trauma (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 54).

Ben may blame and hate his parents for not telling him, but actually he is likewise incapable to mourn. He does not approve of Naomi’s rituals of mourning like bringing flowers to his parents’ grave (Coffey 35), because he cannot understand that she does this out of love and empathy for his parents (Michaels, *FP* 248). Ben therefore could never have been their witness, neither does he “recognize the emotional warmth and security which his wife Naomi might offer him” (Krote 521).

Having experienced how traumatic memories are handed down and how the second generation has to struggle under these traumas that are not their own, Ben fears that his parents’ trauma is inscribed in his flesh and thus may be passed on to his children (Parry 358-359; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 76):

Naomi says a child doesn’t have to inherit fear. But who can separate fear from the body? My parents’ past is mine molecularly. [...] I want to believe she can

rinse the fear from my mouth. But I imagine Naomi has a child and I can't stop the writing on its forehead from growing as the child grows. (Michaels, *FP* 280)

However, rather than to try to mourn properly and to work through his trauma Ben withdraws into self-pity and is actually on the fringe of isolating himself and stagnating in his trauma like his parents.

To sum up, Ben's trauma also stems from the Holocaust. As a member of the second generation, he has partially inherited it from his parents who were incapable of claiming it, but a great deal of his trauma also results from the living conditions under which he grew up. In contrast to Jakob, who tries to deal with his traumatic memories and tries to fight for a meaningful life, Ben reacts with anger, self-pity and withdrawal to these traumas and is therefore much more in danger to remain thus traumatized than the other characters in the novel.

## **4.2 THE WINTER VAULT**

### **4.2.1 Marina**

Marina, Avery's mother, is another character whose trauma had its sources in the Nazi ideology and the following Holocaust. She was born into a German Jewish family who emigrated to Amsterdam after the events in 1933. She then took a job in Scotland and as the only member of her family thus escaped deportation and death in Fohrenwald (Michaels, *TWV* 98).

Through these personal losses and her membership of the Jewish community she is deeply traumatized and haunted by the fate of her family and of thousands of other Jews. In this respect she resembles Jakob, but in contrast to him, she knows where and how her family members had died. The hole left behind by their loss has clearer contours, and she can claim the trauma, transform it and integrate it into her life narrative, but for a long time she is haunted by this absence nevertheless.

She suffers especially from the fact that she did not wish her mother goodbye: "To this very moment I cannot believe I took leave of her on the platform of the Centraal station

so carelessly, with such a youthful disdain of fate. I thought I had all the time in the world to return to her, but it was the last time I would ever see her face or be held by her” (Michaels, *TWV* 92). Despite all her composure and strength she acknowledges that this regret is still present and overcomes her from time to time as fiercely as at the beginning: “[d]aughters don’t stop crying for their mothers. [...] It’s like a spell, said Marina. Nothing eats away time like the past” (Michaels, *TWV* 92).

Because of this still not integrated aspect of her trauma, she partly handed it down to Avery, who sometimes also feels haunted by the Holocaust (Michaels, *TWV* 159). He sees its tracks and traces everywhere (e.g., on a visit to Turin (Michaels, *TWV* 105)), easily associates things with it and feels the duty to commemorate or to pay tributes to the dead. Thus, when he is studying architecture, a student’s descriptions of an exclusive holiday resort, where “[t]he train would take people directly to the showers” (Michaels, *TWV* 274) immediately trigger associations in Avery which are however not understood by his colleagues:

I felt quite sick. All I could think of were the trains from Amsterdam to Treblinka, and finally I said so. The whole class turned to look at me as if I were demented. I thought, Now I’ve done it, they’ll think I’m cracked, obsessed. Finally, a young woman asked, ‘What’s Treblinka?’ ... (Michaels, *TWV* 274)

In Canada, where the Holocaust is not thus strongly inscribed in the collective memory, such remarks make Avery an outsider. Like so many survivors, he is therefore confronted with misunderstanding.

#### **4.2.2 Lucjan**

Lucjan, another witness of the Holocaust, the war and its aftermath, experiences a whole myriad of losses and traumas. We learn about them through the stories he tells Jean and cannot but be certain that living in the ghetto or the ruined Warsaw has to be traumatizing and destructive to both life narrative and identity.

#### ***The Jewish underdog***

As a representative of the Jewish people, Lucjan’s traumatization certainly stems from their persecution and the genocide. As a child, he is forced into the Warsaw ghetto with

his mother, where he has to witness random murders, the hunger and desperation of the inhabitants. After the war, when the information spread and the actual cruelties dawn upon him, the knowledge that for some the war was not horrible at all, but even profitable, evokes “[a] big rage” (Michaels, *TWV* 300). His trauma is thus not only a result of his experiences in the ghetto or during the Warsaw Uprising or, in contrast to Jakob, from the mass murder on Jews. It is rather the fact that Jews were generally treated with such disrespect and inhumanity not only by the Nazis, but also by Poles who “stepped over dead Jews in the street on their way to lunch” (Michaels, *TWV* 267). He is certainly traumatized by the Nazi’s ideology that reduced them to mere objects, but suffers even more from the fact that Jews have never been anything more than hardly tolerated outsiders.

Despite his origin, Lucjan survives. He escapes the ghetto and deportation and as the war increases, his Jewish roots become less important. He is now allowed to join the Polish resistance. Under the constant peril of losing his life to some casual bullet he joins a group of students who collect artefacts among the ruins of the city and during the Warsaw Uprising he works as a messenger, again risking his life. After the war, as so many others, he has lost everything and everyone and this makes him equal to all those who roam the streets of the destroyed city. As long as the social hierarchy is not re-established, his Jewish ancestry is secondary.

Lucjan is just one among those “twenty thousands [...] living in the ruins, and within weeks there were ten times as many of us Robinson Kruzoos [...], who needed to be where they last saw their mother or their father” (Michaels, *TWV* 212). He maroons the destroyed city; constantly encountering either injured, hungry or dead people (Michaels, *TWV* 215-216). Driven by hunger, he has to succumb to his most basic instincts; he eats what he finds not caring for others, although he is ashamed of his behaviour afterwards (Michaels, *TWV* 227). One can hardly imagine how traumatizing living under these conditions must have been, how far from normality and the life before the war Lucjan has come. He formulates it the following way: “At night [...] I lay in my *melina*<sup>80</sup> listening to the stone rain. [...] I used to feel how far it was from listening to the rain

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<sup>80</sup> Polish term for a hide-out; in this case among the ruins of Warsaw.

with my mother in the spring evenings on Freta Street, when I had only the problem of deciding which fairy tale to read before bed” (Michaels, *TWV* 255-256). On the other hand, he also encounters love and hope, e.g., in a provisional marriage ceremony among the ruins (Michaels, *TWV* 236).

Gradually, his life in the ruins of a destroyed city and culture becomes so normal to him that he actually gets used to falling asleep “to the sound of crying” (Michaels, *TWV* 237). He even finds a new goal in rebuilding the city and by doing so also hopes to find a new home. However, he gradually becomes aware that the old social order that has been suspended during the war slowly returns. Although he sees Warsaw as his city and loves it as any other would, he is still an outsider among its citizens. He may help rebuilding it, but he is still ‘a Jew’, an unimportant component that can be cut out:

I’d helped rescue fragments of Polish culture, architectural slag. Now I worked to rebuild the city, stone by stone. I was a child and a Jew: you could say it was not my city, not my culture, and yet you could say it was. When your arm is in the water, you are part of it; when you pull it out, there is no trace of you left behind. (Michaels, *TWV* 237)

Faced with the ruins of his former life and confronted with the only possibility to resume a life as an outsider in the Polish society, he therefore chooses to leave his native country and the city whose destruction and resurrection he has witnessed and immigrates to Canada.

### *Jeszcze straszniejsze?*

However, the most traumatizing incident in Lucjan’s life is the loss of his mother; a loss he will never be able to claim and integrate into his life narrative; not even by imagining her death, as Jakob does. With respect to this trauma he remains stagnated.

Lucjan adored and admired his mother (“She was so beautiful. Educated, refined, assimilated” (Michaels, *TWV* 221)) and during the war, when they were moved to the ghetto, their relationship grew even closer. He remembers how “[t]hose years when my mother and I were alone together she talked to me all the time” (Michaels, *TWV* 221) and how he relied on her and her stories that soothed and distanced him from the dark reality and showed him that there was still beauty, meaning and hope in life.

Her sudden disappearance is the more traumatizing, because he is ignorant about how it occurred: “The places where people were killed often showed no mark; within moments the bit of pavement looked exactly as before” (Michaels, *TWV* 287). Like Jakob, who does not know anything about the whereabouts or circumstances of his sister’s death, Lucjan is left in the dark about his mother’s fate. In order to claim her loss, he tries to keep his former memories of her and uses them to refer to her sudden disappearance:

While we waited at that stop for the #14 tram, my mother would comment that it was really a very foolish place to put a clock [...] I remember the feel of her wool coat against my cheek as I stood beside her, her sure fingers around mine. That little hand on the clock jumping forward without me is the symbol for me of how my mother disappeared ... (Michaels, *TWV* 285)

However, any attempt to transform her loss and integrate it into his life narrative fails. It remains accurate, but fragmented and incomplete and it is clearly hard for him to tell Jean about it. What he knows is so little and any attempt is only unsatisfying for him:

I sat looking out the window to the street below where my mother was waiting to meet someone to make a trade for food. She was standing in the street because of me, to feed me. That is how my stepfather thought about it afterwards and why he never forgave me... [...] I looked away from the window for a moment – no more than a few seconds – or maybe I was just daydreaming – and when I turned my eyes back again, my mother was gone, simply gone, just like that. I never saw her again. I still feel sure that if I hadn’t turned away my eyes just at that moment, nothing would have happened to her. A simple-minded, childish revelation – that we can die without a trace. (Michaels, *TWV* 287-288)

These are the memories of a child who has lost the most important and most beloved person in his life within seconds. Lucjan gets totally numbed and thus it is hardly of consequence to him that he is blamed for his mother’s disappearance by his stepfather. He actually feels such a strong survivor guilt, blames himself so much for not having been able to save his mother, that everything, every traumatic experience or any loss that comes afterwards hardly enlarges the hole left behind by the loss of his mother. In contrast to so many others who suffered severely during the German and Russian occupation of Poland, there was no “‘worse still’ – *jeszcze straszniejsze*” (Michaels, *TWV* 277) left for him. Unable to feel more grief, he just continues to live, but without any hope for healing or an improvement of his situation.

Of course, Lucjan is shocked that his stepfather, who no longer takes any interest in his stepson, abandons him and leaves him alone in a destroyed city, but it is also surprising how composed he takes this loss: “many months later there was a moment when I understood that he’d never intended to come back. [...] suddenly I was free, perfectly free of him. I can’t express the relief such despair can be” (Michaels, *TWV* 222).

The methodical destruction of his hometown by the Germans after the Uprising actually grieves him more (Michaels, *TWV* 213, 218). Like so many others, he experiences the disbelief and the sadness, but they do not enlarge his trauma or make him succumb to it. The traumatizing events after the end of the war, like the sudden change of the Polish borders and that “Europe was torn up and resewn” (Michaels, *TWV* 279) to be then split into east and west, does not affect him either. He simply observes that life goes on and accepts that the world he knew has been transformed overnight and that some wounds were covered up while others were re-opened or newly inflicted.

Similarly, he puts away with the despotism under the communist regime: “People disappeared. Sometimes they came back, but most of the time they didn’t. [...] When someone died from torture, they said ‘he fell off the table.’” (Michaels, *TWV* 291) – “that’s what the Germans did and that’s what the Soviets did” (Michaels, *TWV* 291-292). Even the disappearance and probable death of his friend Ostap (Michaels, *TWV* 271) is just another trauma among others.

Nevertheless, his apparent numbness does not render him passive. Along with his friends he fights the regime he is convinced to be wrong and even agrees to give up his family. His wife, who on the one hand is afraid of the Communists and on the other hand has a profitable affair with a Soviet bureaucrat, separates herself and her daughter from Lucjan and his only comment on this incident is that “she cost me my daughter but at least didn’t cost me the lives of my friends” (Michaels, *TWV* 317). As it will be proven in his relationship to Jean, Lucjan, despite his traumatization and his resulting numbness and hopelessness for himself, has also grown into a strong person who in turn is able to help others.



### 4.2.3 Jean

#### *Loss of the mother*

Jean is traumatized through being a half-orphan. Most of her childhood is dominated by the loss of her mother and the resulting sadness and longing for her that overshadows both her life narrative and her identity development. Even as an adult, she claims that “I still have no word for that depth of sadness” (Michaels, *TWV* 57).

She feels her mother’s loss even more profoundly, because she has to witness her father’s enormous grief and his weakness and inability to overcome the loss of his wife. She vows never to leave him alone in his suffering and deliberately joins him in his mourning (Michaels, *TWV* 58). Her father thus clearly fails to act as a caregiver and Jean to a certain degree develops a “caretaker self” (Winnicott in Etherington 26). She has to look after herself from a very early stage of her life and even takes care of her father, but such a development is hardly healthy for a child. Jean withdraws from society and becomes fixated on her father and through him on her dead mother. Every action, every habit becomes an act of commemoration and everything she and her father experience is overshadowed by sadness and mourning that the mother could not join them (Michaels, *TWV* 60).

As a result, Jean’s entire life and identity settle around the hole left behind by her mother’s sudden death, which is clearly traumatizing for her. Similar to Ben, her “life formed around an absence” (Michaels, *TWV* 60). In her attempt to fill this absence and to keep her mother close she starts wearing her mother’s clothes (Michaels, *TWV* 59) or tending her garden. Jean’s mother is therefore always both present and absent and haunts Jean like a ghost. Small details, like the sound of a handbag being shut, immediately trigger memories of her mother (Michaels, *TWV* 42) or fill Jean with sadness and longing. However, as a result of her trauma, Jean also grows hypersensitive to other people’s suffering and to their needs and easily empathizes with them. When the alteration of the Saint Lawrence River, e.g., destroys towns and villages, Jean’s memory of her personal loss and grief is triggered: “Jean stood near Avery at the edge of the field, unable to move. She was remembering the destitution of standing above a grave as it is closed, the destitution of standing above” (Michaels, *TWV* 68). Knowing how it

feels like to observe the burial of a loved person, she also knows how the people must feel about watching their houses drown.

Jean claims that she knows she should lay her mother to rest in order to recover from her trauma (Michaels, *TWV* 63), but she remains captured in aberrated mourning nevertheless and still keeps her mother as a ghost among the living. For a long time, she is therefore stagnant in her trauma and makes it impossible for everybody, including Avery and Marina, to help her move beyond the loss of her mother.

### *Loss of the daughter*

This partially unclaimed trauma is then only aggravated by Jean's loss of her child. She longed for that child, hoping that it would fill the absence in her life. However, "[a] child is like a fate; one's future and one's past" (Michaels, *TWV* 165). In other words, her unclaimed trauma returns and haunts her, because as long as it is not integrated into her life narrative, Jean is forced to experience it again and again. Her hopes to come to terms with this trauma and to be finally able to look into a bright future are smashed and once again Jean's life narrative is seriously shattered. The new loss of her daughter only enlarges the absence left behind by her mother's death.

Her loss is the more dramatic because it comes about in steps. Jean has to carry the dead child for several weeks and falls into depression and unbearable grief. She feels estranged from her body and from her husband: "When he tried to come near, he felt it, her invisible shrivelling from touch. As if she had spoken aloud: My body is a grave" (Michaels, *TWV* 170). To deal with these traumatizing conditions, she withdraws into isolation, distancing herself from the world and every other human being (Michaels, *TWV* 170).

After the birth of her dead child Jean's life appears to come to a halt altogether. Everything that has happened before has become meaningless and she does not see any future. Her whole world and life just concentrates on the "sunken head against her own face, she clutched the now weightless baby and would not let go; the embrace that no nurse or midwife dared to tear apart" (Michaels, *TWV* 172). Those who are near her are torn between empathy and terror; unable to bring her back into reality (Michaels, *TWV* 172). They can only partly understand what she suffers and Jean, although surrounded

by those who love her, is alone in her grief. She becomes completely numbed and additionally feels some sort of phantom pain, a bodily memory of her child, which only reinforces her feeling of loss: "For months after birth, a child remains in the mother's body; moon and tide. Before the child cries, the mother flashes wet with milk. [...] And when the child is spirit, it is exactly the same" (Michaels, *TWV* 173).

In time, her bodily reactions cease and Jean gradually re-enters normality, but now the disruption of her life narrative and identity becomes even more obvious. Jean has lost her plot, her meaning and purpose in life and with it any trust in herself. She does no longer believe in a future, nor does she know what she should make of her past and thus simply wanders like a ghost through the world. She is completely broken, unable to claim her traumatic experiences and does not know where to start mending or re-formulating her narrative. Neither has she the strength to re-create her narrative, to integrate and interpret the traumatic experiences and thus to link her former and present self. She is full of fear; fear that she might experience further losses, fear of bearing another child and this fear of the future does not allow her to go on.

She therefore takes the pieces of her life narrative and instead of trying to link them, she puts them away unaltered. She decides to repress her trauma and thus chooses stagnation over confrontation. Thus unable to deal with herself and to define her own identity, she also resigns from any intimacy, even from Avery. She suffers under their separation, even feels "the lurch of banishment" (Michaels, *TWV* 204) and later, when she has met Lucjan, a new fear and sadness arises:

Jean sat at her table with her seed books and a map of the city spread open around her, pen in air, while sorrow moved from heart to head, a creeping paralysis. [...] Every detail and regret accompanied by the fear that her history with Avery was being erased by Lucjan's touch, Lucjan's stories. (Michaels, *TWV* 247)

She is now terrified of losing her former identity and the chapters of her former life narrative forever. She knows that her past is important for her identity and that she should try to retrieve it and continue on this basis, but still afraid of any further trauma she rather chooses isolation.

The dried out riverbeds that are again and again mentioned in the novel relate to Jean's dried out fertility and productivity. Her losses have left her numbed and stagnated, but

there is hope, because as life can spring from apparently dead ground, Jean may find a way to claim her trauma and re-establish her life narrative and identity.

#### 4.2.4 Avery

##### *Loss of the father*

Avery's trauma is similar to Jean's. When they meet, he also mourns the loss of a parent and like her, he feels as if his father has left a hole in his life that will never be filled again. The bond between father and son was strong; for Avery his father was the person with whom he could talk and share not only his profession and fascination for engines and machines, but also beliefs, values and their personal little rituals. Avery actually always "wanted to feel what he felt. [He] [...] craved to belong to him" (Michaels, *TWV* 154). He depended on his father, needed his narrative as a model and relied on him as a witness and a reader for his own life narrative and identity. Bearing this in mind, one can easily understand how lonely Avery feels after his father's death. He is now wandering the earth with a manuscript for his life narrative, but he lacks a (proof-)reader and editor.

Unsure to create a vision for the future, he therefore does not move beyond the hole his father left in his life, but tries to keep him close. For this purpose Avery always recalls his father's teachings, beliefs and comments and tries to see the world through his father's eyes. Avery thus largely takes over his father's narrative and moves in his footsteps, e.g., experiencing "his father's pleasure" (Michaels, *TWV* 17) when he sees a clever technical solution. This shows that Avery is not yet strong enough to move out from behind his father's shadow. He is comfortable to commemorate his father's ways, to follow his path, but does not take the effort to find his own way, to construct his own identity and life narrative.

##### *Loss of Jean*

When he meets Jean, he hopes to overcome his loss through creating a new life narrative with her. But this relationship is torn by yet another traumatic loss. After the stillbirth of his daughter Avery is devastated and incapable of taking any action or helping Jean to regain hope. He cannot pull her out of her numbness and is himself at the point of giving

up any hope to mend their shattered life narrative. The destruction of their narrative as well as their intimacy is even obvious from the way they behave. Unconsciously they mark the empty space left behind by the dead daughter: "Avery and Jean stood a little apart, always now there seemed space for another between them" (Michaels, *TWV* 190).

However, in all his sadness "[h]e knew one thing with certainty: nothing would heal this way, in this orbit of defeat, this brokenness" (Michaels, *TWV* 191) and Avery therefore proposes a separation. He suffers under it, especially when Jean befriends Lucjan, because then he sees how Jean changes, which in turn increases his feeling of guilt, because he failed to help her (Michaels, *TWV* 224). He also observes that she is slowly moving away from him and fears that he might lose her forever:

Jean's childhood, her web of memory and unconscious memory, had once been her gift only to him. Now it had been given to another. This was the loss that overwhelmed him the most. Our memories contain more than we remember: those moments too ordinary to keep, from which, all of our lives, we drink. Of all the privileges of love, this seemed to him to be the most affecting: to witness, in another, memories. (Michaels, *TWV* 328-329)

Avery reacts with avoidance and throws himself into work and his studies. However, memories of Jean rise intrusively from time to time: "The weather, the light, would awaken referred pain, details of her. The feel of her forearm up his spine, her hand between his shoulders" (Michaels, *TWV* 224). Sometimes he longs for her thus desperately, that he reflects upon ending their separation. "But, like two halves created by a single blade, there was a second fear informing his actions, which compelled him to forbearance, the fear of wasting his last chance with her" (Michaels, *TWV* 224). He knows that he needs Jean and her narrative to mend his own, to re-claim his identity and construct a meaningful future, and he does not want to lose this chance. Unconsciously he therefore knows that their separation is the right and probably the only way to come to terms with their trauma, because no ready-made solution will help them to overcome their loss. The uncertainty whether they will ever find a ground on which they can start afresh is however clearly distressing to Avery.

### 4.3 TRAUMA AS PORTRAYED IN THE NOVELS

Having discussed the sources and effects of the characters' traumas and how they are reflected by their style of description, this section casts a brief look at some further elements of the discourse level. It is investigated how trauma is represented in the overall structure and style of the novels, as well as in the used motifs and paratexts. Interestingly, both novels show quite a few similarities in this respect.

#### 4.3.1 *Fugitive Pieces*

*Fugitive Pieces* consists of two parts and a preface. The first part contains Jakob's memoirs, which have been found after his death, which is mentioned in the preface by Ben, the author of the second part. The workings of trauma are already presented in this unusual structure.

Because of the preface the whole novel is overshadowed by the image of lost and buried manuscripts, the reader's knowledge of Jakob's random death and the last sentence, "A man's work, like his life, is never completed", which resounds in our heads while we continue reading. On the one hand, we are encouraged to take Jakob's memoirs as one authentic example of those lost manuscripts and thus are already introduced to the still traumatic legacy of the Holocaust (Bölling 176). On the other hand, the question whether Jakob gained something from his life "haunts the first part of the narrative, which tells the story of his survival and rescue" (King 141). Like the reader, his biographer Ben, who is entrusted with Jakob's legacy, is likewise haunted by this question to which he cannot find an answer. The quotes from Jakob's notebooks in Ben's account are thus like the voice of a ghost resounding in the present and asking Ben as well as the reader to search for the meaning in Jakob's life.

The structure and form of both accounts represent trauma<sup>81</sup>. They are interrupted by intertitles and paragraph markers and there are several ellipses and jumps in time. For example, the reader leaves Jakob still a bachelor in "The Way Station" and suddenly

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<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of the structure and the title see also Williams and Polatinsky (6-7).

encounters Alex as Jakob's wife in "Phosphorus". Their meeting is then narrated in retrospect. McAlister further claims that such a lack of a chronological and ordered representation shows that characters "have trouble integrating traumatic aspects of their past into their holistic sense of self, and to varying degrees, their identities are likewise represented by destabilizing the stylistic devices that conventionally serve to create continuity in a character" (105)<sup>82</sup>.

However, both accounts are attempts to translate their authors' trauma into words and as such they may automatically be fragmented and discontinuous. They are written in retrospect and in Jakob's case, when he has already found healing in his relationship with Michaela. His traumatic experiences and memories are integrated into his life narrative as something past and he looks back at his former self without fear or pain. There are still holes left in his narrative, but he can draw a continual line to his presence. He is already distanced to his trauma and its effects and therefore able to reflect and comment on its meaning (King 141). We therefore do not witness his re-enactments or flashbacks directly, but are told about them. Self-reflexive comments like "Athos's family home – where I now sit and write this, these many years later" (Michaels, *FP* 155)<sup>83</sup> show us that he has already laid them to rest. In contrast, Ben, although also at a later stage in his healing process, is less distanced to his traumatic memories. Since he is still in the process of claiming his trauma and has not yet found total healing, there are no self-reflexive comments and his account is much more chaotic and discontinuous.

Trauma is also reflected in the titles and intertitles. As Genette explains in his discussion of paratexts<sup>84</sup>, titles are actually part of the narrative; they are one of the first things that strike a reader, make her/him interested and actually may "[function] like some opening words" (67).

The title "Fugitive Pieces" already introduces the reader to the novel's themes and structure (Coffey 29) and Whitehead argues that "Michaels relies on the motif of

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<sup>82</sup> See also Bölling (187).

<sup>83</sup> See also Michaels (*FP* 134).

<sup>84</sup> See also Abbott (26-27).

fragments to represent the Holocaust, so that the novel is pervaded by the notion of a past that has been shattered and broken into pieces” (*Trauma Fiction* 53).

It is first and foremost a text about “people in flight, who are wanderers from place to place, refugees, exiles, nomads” (Howells 108) and about their fractured and incomplete memories and narratives they carry around with them. According to Cook, it also shows “the fragility of memory” (13) that can be shattered into pieces and disappear as easily as diaries, texts or other artefacts and refers to the novel’s theme of collecting and holding these fragments together (Howells 116). Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 58) argues that both characters gain indeed their insights and a feeling of continuity and wholeness while gradually collecting the pieces of their past.

Several “pieces” also reappear like haunting traumatic memories throughout the novel. There are the musical pieces like Bella’s intermezzos (Michaels, *FP* 125, 137)), the operas Ben’s father listens to or the lullabies Naomi sings (Coffey 29). Bölling (178) points out that the term “fugitive” may refer to a fugue and Howell adds that such a “hidden analogy is very important for thinking about the narrative structure of the novel, for a fugue is a musical composition structured on two or more themes which recur with variations and are harmonized in counterpoint” (Howells 113).

Furthermore, Jakob’s and Ben’s lives show indeed numerous parallels and analogies and the imagery and themes<sup>85</sup> reappear in both accounts, which again points towards the re-enactment of trauma. Zeitlin comments that “[t]hroughout [the novel] a single note plays with infinite variations” (186). Both characters, e.g., suffer from the loss of siblings, both carry the memory of the dead in the form of nightmares, struggle with a problematic marriage, and show parallels in their description of the Holocaust. Forests as places of terror and massacre reappear; as do floods (Biskupin and the Humber River). Finally, they both rely on geology and meteorology as medium to express themselves and make sense of the world and especially of the Holocaust (Estrin 290; Zeitlin 188). Bölling (177) therefore even sees the Ben-Jakob-relationship as meta-fictional, because the constant parallels, repetitions and links between the two parts

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<sup>85</sup> See Williams and Polatinsky (6), Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 266), Howells (113), Bölling (177), Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 54) and Kandiyoti (315).



motivate the reader “über den Konstruktcharakter der Geschichtsdarstellung in *Fugitive Pieces* zu reflektieren” (Bölling 178).

The intertitles then introduce the reader to the major themes of the passages. The title “The Drowned City” refers to the nature of trauma and the traumatic memories which are inaccessible and distorted or even repressed as if they were underwater. It also refers to Biskupin, which, like traumatic memories, was buried and forgotten, but came back nevertheless. “The Stone-carriers”<sup>86</sup> describes trauma as a burden, as the load of the past, one has to carry until one reaches the right spot to put it down. “Vertical Time” hints to the phenomenon that time stands still for the traumatized person; past is present and present is past<sup>87</sup>; they are captured within their trauma. “Phosphorus” and “Terra Nullius”<sup>88</sup> then introduce the discussion whether a new beginning is possible, whether one can start anew on some white spot or whether one has to accept this gap left behind by the trauma. Finally, “The Gradual Instant” and “The Way Station” open the possibilities for recovery. Most of them appear in both Jakob’s and Ben’s texts (Bölling 177), but while Jakob succeeds in transforming his trauma and translating his aberrated into inaugurate, narrative memory, Ben is still travelling towards healing and therefore his text ends with the section entitled “The Way Station” (cf. Howells 114; Parry 356).

#### **4.3.2 *The Winter Vault***

For her second novel Michaels chose a third person narrator. The characters’ therefore do not describe or reflect upon their traumas in their own words and reflections, but they are mediated through the narrator. We are left with inferring the sources for their traumas and guessing about their effects.

However, the haunting character of trauma is also represented in the structure of *The Winter Vault* and its recurring motifs and themes. Avery and Jean repeatedly observe the traumatizing destruction of landscapes and of people’s losing their homes, their sacred places and burial sites and they witness how customs and traditions have to be

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<sup>86</sup> For another discussion of this intertitle see Krote (528).

<sup>87</sup> See also Cook (20).

<sup>88</sup> For another discussion of “Terra Nullius” and “The Way Station” see Omhové (93).

abandoned or are lost along with the land and the memories. The similarity of the consequences between the construction of Aswan dam and the alteration of the Saint Lawrence River is so obvious that Avery recalls the names of the towns flooded in Canada when he thinks of those to be flooded by Lake Nassa (Michaels, *TWV* 35).

Both are able to empathize and are aware of the enormous traumatic impact the alteration of the landscape has on its inhabitants. The Aswan High Dam is, e.g., described as “a gash so deep and long that the land would never recover” (Michaels, *TWV* 24). Thus the move of Abu Simbel does not fill Avery “with triumph or exhaustion, but with shame” (Michaels, *TWV* 5). He knows that he is part of an operation that traumatizes both land and people and desecrates the temples and the river. Later, he will compare the desecrated temple to his wife’s body: As Ramses was sliced open, the child was taken from Jean’s belly, leaving her hollow. The scars of the cut(s) are no longer visible, and thus the trauma can apparently be forgotten, but this is not the case (Michaels, *TWV* 178-179). The wound still cries out.

A further echo of the destruction of the Canadian villages and the Nubian cities will then be heard in Lucjan’s account about the sacking and destruction of Warsaw and Jean will again link her own losses to those of Lucjan and his friends.

The title “The Winter Vault” can also be taken as a description of trauma. It refers to the custom of keeping those who died during the winter in a vault until the ground is no longer frozen (Michaels, *TWV* 241). It has however also a metaphoric meaning, namely it refers to “the emotional space, the season of grief, that we all occupy as we respond to deep loss” (Haun 169). The vaults thus symbolize the time of waiting, the phase of repression and the gradual healing process until one is strong enough to mourn the dead and lay them to rest. Until then, those who are left behind might wander in darkness and despair, they may be stagnated in their sadness, but when the ground thaws and becomes fertile again, they may be able to move on.

Jean’s experiences of the time until her mother was laid to rest illustrate this double meaning of the winter vault:

For almost two months, several times a week, my father and I drove past the fields, past forest, to sit on camp chairs by the door of the vault. And do you know what my father did? He read to her. [...] At first I could not bear the thought of my mother listening behind that heavy, closed door. But slowly, as the days passed, I began to feel that although her dead body was inside, somehow her soul was not. The sound of my father reading became a kind of benediction, an absolution. [...] The day we finally buried my mother was the last we ever visited the place together. I understood what my father felt, something we never could have imagined – that even a grave can be a kind of redemption. (Michaels, *TWV* 243)

The trauma resulting from the loss of her daughter will let her and her husband once again wait outside a vault until they can claim and mourn their loss and lay their daughter to rest. They are then able to re-unite in “Petrichor”, which refers to the “utterly distinctive smell, when rain first starts to fall”, which Haun also calls “the scent of renewal” (169).

## **5 TRAUMA AND THE HEALING POTENTIAL OF NARRATIVE**

Having dealt with the various sources and forms of traumatization in the novels, the focus now shifts to ways of healing involving either narrating, reading or telling a narrative. Drawing again on several theories from the field of psychotherapy, history and literary criticism which also use narrative as means for healing, this chapter therefore describes the gradual recovery process.

### **5.1 CAN TRAUMA BE HEALED?**

The first question that has to be answered is however whether trauma can be healed. If trauma, as Caruth argues, is an eternally unclaimed and therefore haunting experience, then it appears to resist any assimilation or integration into one’s memory schemas or life narrative and consequently recovery is impossible. Similar to Adorno’s claim, she further argues that any attempt to translate trauma into words and thus to claim and understand it automatically involves the distortion of its accuracy and truth and one only creates a (re)construction of the past, which again does not offer consolation (LaCapra, *History in Transit* 208). As Whitehead states, there is indeed “a distinct tendency in

recent theorizations of trauma towards an anti-therapeutic stance, a scepticism regarding the inherent value of telling one's story" (*Memory* 117).

However, such a theory that denies any form of recovery is clearly depressing and constraining. Several theorists along with writers have thus criticized and challenged this belief in trauma's incurability. They argue that it is the common human tendency to look for meaning in everything we encounter (van der Kolk 296), even in incomprehensible traumatic experiences and memories, and that this attitude offers ways of healing, or at least methods to make trauma bearable. Some critics therefore condemn the definition of trauma as an un-claimable void as "*Phantasma*" (Erdle 34) The reason for such theories is that we can thus "*mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable" (Rose 43) and consequently need not listen to trauma victims (Erdle 33-34).

Other critics, like LaCapra (*History* 174; *History in Transit* 206-207), agree with Caruth that trauma disrupts temporality and shatters a person's narrative and self. They also acknowledge that a traumatized person is forced to act out the past repeatedly, because there is a lack of closure. LaCapra (*History and Memory* 45) however continues that acting-out might be a necessary part of working-through, and therefore not an absolute impediment to healing<sup>89</sup>. One must not repress, avoid or resist trauma's intruding character, but one should try to grasp, translate and integrate it into one's narrative memory, to mourn the losses and create a meaningful life narrative and thus gain new perspectives for a future that is not dominated by trauma (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 40). LaCapra thus argues in favour of a theory (and therapy) that "would not deny the irreducibility of loss or the role of paradox and aporia. But instead of becoming compulsively fixated on or symptomatically reinforcing impasses, it would encourage a process of mourning that would attempt, however self-questioningly and haltingly, to specify its haunting objects and (even if only symbolically) to give them a 'proper' burial" (*History* 193).

The acknowledgement of the intrusive and elusive character of traumatic experiences and memories thus does not deny the search for possible ways of healing. From the very

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<sup>89</sup> Freud actually claimed that the repetition of trauma took place because the consciousness was trying to grasp the experience and thus re-establish its protective shield (Whitehead, *Memory* 95).

beginning of studies on trauma emphasis actually has been laid on the attempt to develop methods for its treatment and recovery, and some of them are based on the idea of healing through the activity of narrating. In fact, Freud and Breuer already used the “talking cure” (Rabelhofer)<sup>90</sup> as treatment of hysteria and they observed that as soon the patient had told the story her/his state improved (Luckhurst 499). Nowadays several other methods like Narrative Exposure Therapy (cf. Schauer, Neuner and Elbert)<sup>91</sup>, Narrative Therapy (cf. Mills)<sup>92</sup> or Testimony Therapy (cf. Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 23) all use narratives as means for healing. The methods differ with regard to their directness and focus, but they all argue that within a relationship between a narrating traumatized person and an empathic listener trauma can become a claimed experience that then can be integrated in one’s life narrative.

## 5.2 TRAUMA, NARRATIVE AND WAYS OF HEALING<sup>93</sup>

Healing trauma through narratives includes several steps which are all interlinked<sup>94</sup>. As pointed out in the chapter on narratology, reading, narrating and telling narratives are crucial for our understanding of ourselves, the world around us and our relationships to

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<sup>90</sup> The term was used by Anna O., a patient of Breuer, to describe the form of her treatment; mentioned in Rabelhofer, Whitehead (*Memory* 91) and J. Herman (*Trauma* 12; taken from Breuer and Freud 7).

<sup>91</sup> NET, for example, helps the patient to face his traumatic memories, but within the context of his normal, autobiographical memories. It lets the patient tell his chronological life story (an aspect taken from testimony therapy) and incorporate the trauma (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 24). “The essence of NET is to connect the hot memory, i.e., sensations, feelings, and thoughts to the corresponding sequences in the autobiography by putting all memory fragments into words and thus into declarative memory” (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 34).

<sup>92</sup> “NT draws on personal narratives-stories-for the specific purpose of defining psychological problems and proposing solutions” (Mills 375). The therapist investigates together with the patient her/his cultural or social scripts and looks whether they hinder her/him to interpret her/his own story. The therapy aims at bringing the patient’s interpretation of his experiences into the open and thus the patient may understand how he is influenced not only by her/himself, but also by culture. Only then can s/he reject and abandon those imposed social, cultural or even personal norms and re-write or re-interpret her/his narrative (Mills 376). Michael White and David Epston are two representatives of this branch.

<sup>93</sup> The following section contains many points already mentioned by van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela. For their discussion of trauma and the healing potential of literary narratives see chapter 4 (52-71).

<sup>94</sup> Most scholars (J. Herman, *Trauma* 155; van der Kolk, van der Hart and Marmar 304, Turner, McFarlane and van der Kolk 546) generally divide the healing process into several steps and interlinked processes, like the establishment of safety and stability, the acceptance and transformation of the trauma or the reconnection with others and reengagement into life. With regard to treatments using narratives see Tuval-Mashiach et al. (282) or King (5-6).

others. In the following it is shown that the latter two activities are also essential for a recovery from trauma, while the first one is certainly helpful for the process.

### 5.2.1 Narrating

It has been stated and illustrated that trauma destroys our very being. Healing from trauma therefore always implies the recovery of our life narrative and identity. The traumatic experience(s) and memories need to be adapted and transformed into narrative ones (Etherington 32-33) and then integrated into a meaningful frame (van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 429). Traumatized people need to restructure and recreate their world<sup>95</sup>, to re-write and re-evaluate their shattered life narrative and self and regain coherence and meaning in spite of the apparently meaningless and horrible traumatic experience(s); only then can they continue their life (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 6). If they fail to do so, the trauma will remain as an un-integrated and haunting presence; it will become one of the above mentioned “*stories not yet told*” (Ricoeur, *Life* 434) that disturb one’s life narrative and subsequently one’s self.

A traumatized person actually wishes or even feels the need to tell and understand what has happened to her/him (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 63) and, as van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela claim, narratives offer a range of qualities that “make it extremely useful as a vehicle for the expression and discussion of trauma” (59)<sup>96</sup>. A narrative contains a plot and thus creates an ordered and meaningful account in the writer’s and the reader’s head, and this has the potential to heal (Duffy 53). As has been pointed out, narratives also offer the possibility to be written and interpreted in several ways, always depending on what one wants to narrate or which meaning one wants to gain (White and Epston 27-28). Furthermore, a narrative allows us to move back and forth, to re-formulate, re-read or re-interpret our experiences and this is crucial for one’s recovery process, during which one may “[review] issues that have already been addressed many times in order to deepen and expand the survivor’s integration of the meaning of her experience” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 213).

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<sup>95</sup> See also Crossley (*Formulating Narrative Psychology* 295).

<sup>96</sup> See also White and Epston (52-54); esp. for a discussion of the advantages of written narratives.

In order to claim and come to terms with one's trauma one therefore has to create a narrative about it. This includes its translation into a language, so that it can be controlled and communicated and one has to transform it into something comprehensible and meaningful (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 26; Brison, *Aftermath* 54; Tuval-Mashiach et al. 291). Then it can be integrated into one's life narrative whose continuity and synthesis can be restored in turn.

### ***To begin with...***

Since trauma destroys one's fight or flight-system and one's basic trust, a precondition toward healing is to re-establish one's belief in safety and security, which then enables one to regain power and control in one's life (van der Kolk and McFarlane 17; Turner, McFarlane and van der Kolk 538; J. Herman, *Trauma* 159). It starts with regaining the control over one's body and ends with the re-establishment of one's control of the world around oneself (J. Herman, *Trauma* 160). Traumatized people have to overcome their feeling of helplessness and fear, find an average level of arousal, re-establish their normal fight or flight system (Huber, *Teil 2* 184-187) and realize that the once life-threatening traumatic experience belongs to the past and that the present situation is safe (van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 428). Only then may one find the strength to accept and investigate the emotionally loaded and often fragmented traumatic experiences and memories.

### ***Translating – Finding a language to express the trauma***

The next requirement for constructing a narrative is to find a language, a medium of expression. It has been pointed out that one characteristic of all narratives is that the underlying story can be represented by any kind of discourse, and this allows the narrator/author to present and interpret the narrative as s/he pleases. This openness holds the possibility to overcome trauma, because a narrative about trauma can take several forms and can run through different versions until one decides upon the most suitable one.

In this context, the term "narrative" does not exclusively refer to discursive narratives. Any form of art or product of creativity that tries to balance and link sensations and helps to create an ordered structure can be a mediator to transfer trauma "into the single,

apprehensible and meaningful artifact” (Olney 45). Brockmeier claims that a narrative “is a text in which one or more agents tell a story in a particular medium. The medium can be language as well as imagery, sound, spatial construction, or a combination thereof” (255) and Brison (*Aftermath* 73) likewise argues that as long as the trauma is externalized, the medium does not matter; even if it is just one’s imagination. Thus narratives dealing with trauma can be and have been created through paintings, music, sculpture, actions, etc. (Fischer 15).

### ***Transformation – Making trauma meaningful***

A trauma that can be formulated, can also be controlled, ordered and adapted (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 15). As Brison claims, “*saying* something about the memory *does* something to it” (*Aftermath* xi) and Schauer, Neuner and Elbert also argue that it is only “[b]y putting words to the trauma, [that] victims are empowered to overcome their sense of speechlessness and lack of explicit memory” (2). In other words, once one has accomplished the challenge to translate trauma into a language, one is able to claim it. One can give it a specific place and establish a temporal, chronological structure with a beginning, middle and end, and thus become aware of what is past and what is present (LaCapra, *Holocaust Testimonies* 212; J. Herman, *Trauma* 177). One can also transform it into something comprehensible and meaningful and can narrate it as any other experience or memory (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 25; cf. Fischer 16). As a result it loses its intrusive and elusive character.

In the course of this transformation, we usually have to change our schemas<sup>97</sup> or create new ones which can contain the trauma, or the trauma has to be modelled so that it fits the schema (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 56; Fischer 14)<sup>98</sup>. Since narratives and the interpretation of their meaning are flexible, this is no real impediment and as soon as the trauma is “modified and transformed” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 19) and interpreted as meaningful, it can be consciously accessed and controlled and laid to rest. This “working-through” of trauma may leave gaps in the trauma narrative (LaCapra, *History in Transit* 208) and “may never bring full transcendence of acting out [...] but

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<sup>97</sup> See page 13 for a definition of “schema”.

<sup>98</sup> See also the discussion in J. Herman (*Trauma* 41).



[...] [it] may enable processes of judgment and at least limited liability and ethically responsible agency” (LaCapra, *Holocaust Testimonies* 212).

However, the transformation of trauma into a meaningful experience that can be narrated “can [only] begin once we have a strong enough desire to heal” (Etherington 32), and this process is hard and unpleasant. On the one hand, it includes a repeated confrontation with and revival of the trauma, which can be more hurtful than the actual disruption of one’s life narrative. One constantly has to fight the urge to repress the traumatic memories, and in the end one may never progress further than claiming some fragments. On the other hand, it is a difficult task to make trauma meaningful.

Within this context Viktor Frankl’s theory of existentialism is helpful<sup>99</sup>. According to him, everybody has a will to find meaning in life (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 99)<sup>100</sup> in order to gain happiness and experience pleasure and fulfilment (Frankl, *Psychotherapy* 5-6). Actually, there is always a meaning of life, but it “differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour” (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 108) because we ourselves can choose which action or attitude and interpretation we take toward the various components of life (Frankl, *Psychotherapy* 3; *Grundriß* 88). Meaning is thus “essentially unpredictable” (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 131) and man constantly reshapes, creates and/or “determines not only his fate but also his own self” (Frankl, *Psychotherapy* 60-61)<sup>101</sup>. In every situation we face several possible potentialities, and we gain meaning in our life through our decisions about which potentiality we want to actualize (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 120-122). This freedom of choice also implies that man is responsible for his decisions and actions (Frankl, *Grundriß* 98; *Man’s Search* 109; *Psychotherapy* 12).

As we already know, through trauma “life can be skinned of meaning” (Michaels, *TWV* 108), and people experience an “existential vacuum” when they do no longer find any meaning in their lives (Frankl, *Psychotherapy* 19-20). Such existential frustration may lead to depression, aggression, addiction (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 141-143)<sup>102</sup> or even

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<sup>99</sup> Also discussed in van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (12-18).

<sup>100</sup> See also Riemeyer (68); Van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart also claim that “[p]eople are meaning-making creatures” (431).

<sup>101</sup> See also Frankl (*Man’s Search* 131). Note also that this is the same aspect Ricoeur describes in his discussion of identity, which in his opinion is constructed through one’s promises.

<sup>102</sup> Also in Riemeyer (68).

suicide (Frankl, *Grundriß* 121). It is then up to the individual whether s/he succumbs to the trauma or continues to search meaning in life and transforms the disturbing experience into a meaningful part of her/his life narrative<sup>103</sup>.

Recovery and the re-establishment of meaning may be accomplished in three ways<sup>104</sup>: Firstly, “by creating a work or doing a deed” (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 111); that is, we can re-discover meaning by deciding which actions we take. Secondly, “by experiencing something or encountering someone” (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 111), that is, the love and the relationship to another person can give meaning to our life (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 111-112)<sup>105</sup>. Finally, meaning is also to be had “by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering” (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 111). It is up to us how we deal with pain, guilt and death (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 137; *Psychotherapy* 24)<sup>106</sup> and, if we are willing, meaning can even be found in hopeless situations and despite suffering (Frankl, *Man’s Search* 114; *Ja zum Leben* 109). One may, e.g., free oneself from survivor guilt through acknowledging one’s responsibility to the dead ones, especially one’s duty to bear witness to their stories.

Frankl thus sees trauma not as destructive, but, provided that the traumatic experience is interpreted as meaningful (cf. van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 14), even as enriching for one’s life narrative<sup>107</sup>. Frankl’s optimistic stance is of course not free from criticism, but his appeal that one should make trauma meaningful should be taken seriously nevertheless (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 18). Because only if it can be claimed as something meaningful and relevant (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 70) it can be integrated as such in our life narrative.

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<sup>103</sup> Van der Kolk and McFarlane (3) also observed that people react to trauma not only with regression/fixation, but also by dealing with the trauma, claiming it and taking action.

<sup>104</sup> See also Frankl (*Psychotherapy* 15).

<sup>105</sup> Van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart even suggest that “[e]motional attachment is probably the primary protection against being traumatized. People seek close emotional relationships with others in order to help them anticipate, meet, and integrate difficult experiences” (432).

<sup>106</sup> This aspect of Frankl’s theory is also discussed in van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (13-14).

<sup>107</sup> J. Herman (*Trauma* 197) also claims that traumatized people may be able to draw a lesson from the traumatic experience and integrate them as something meaningful into their lives.

### *The problem with the truth*

However, as Caruth (*Introduction II* 153-154)<sup>108</sup> has pointed out, reclaiming traumatic experience and memories and translating or transforming them always involves distorting their accuracy (King 26; Brison, *Aftermath* 70).

Especially memory, once it “is processed through the conscious and verbal systems may be unreliable” (Mollon 102), and according to van der Kolk, memories can no longer be recalled separately once they are integrated into schemas, “but will be distorted both by associated experiences and by the person’s emotional state at the time of recall” (281). These schemas are reproduced, evaluated and reformed, because our mind continually tries to come up with new categories (van der Kolk and van der Hart 169) and hence memories and experiences are likewise constantly re-interpreted and adapted to present situations, although some memories are more stable than others (A. Assmann 15)<sup>109</sup>. With regard to collective memories one has to bear in mind that those have been imposed by the powerful (Olney 36). For Halbwachs (40, 51)<sup>110</sup> the past is therefore always constructed and society always prints its own interpretation and evaluation on it and thus may falsify it.

This criticism can also be transferred to the concept of life narrative. We need narrative to communicate our memories and to access the past (Wyatt 197), but even when one tries to represent it as faithfully as possible, the reality of an event dies with its passing, and we always look back from a present situation (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III* 144-146). Since everybody creates her/his individual life narrative and portrays and interprets the experiences and events s/he encounters subjectively (Wyatt 198), there is no objective or faithful representation of reality or history (Brockmeier and Harré 48-50; White and Epston 58; Wyatt 197). Furthermore, the portrayal and interpretation of events may change over time (King 17). This unreliability of both memory and narrative has started debates whether they are useful as sources, e.g., for history (cf. LaCapra, *History and Memory* 12-16).

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<sup>108</sup> “[T]he capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide and distort” (Caruth *Introduction II* 153-154).

<sup>109</sup> See also Halbwachs (47) and J. Assmann (73).

<sup>110</sup> See also J. Assmann (68, 72-73) and Freeman (291-292).

Critics like Caruth (*Introduction I* 5-6), Adorno (34) or Lyotard (*The Differend* 22)<sup>111</sup> argue that trauma resists any mimetic description. Language is insufficient and inadequate to describe what happened, and any simulacrum (i.e., any form of narrative that transforms reality) is likewise deceitful. In their translated and transformed state traumatic experiences may make sense, but this sense is only an illusion, because in reality trauma cannot make sense. Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela agree that as soon as “the traumatic memory is turned into narrative, it is the beginning of a healing process, but it also means that the original experience is changed to fit into a narrative, so that its ‘real nature’ still eludes our vision” (66). According to Caruth (cf. *Introduction II* 154-155) and Lyotard (*The Differend* 22), the only way to pay true tribute to what happened is apparently to capture this inexpressibility of trauma, its fragmented character and disrupted temporality and the insufficiency of language.

Whitehead (*Memory* 117) claims that Caruth’s refusal of any representation of trauma is insofar right, since it warns us to be careful with trauma and traumatic memories and not to trivialize and artificially harmonize them. Leys, however, concludes her discussion about the differences in Freud’s and Janet’s theories<sup>112</sup> that it is a “non-contradictory [proposition] that memory conceived as truth-telling is overestimated but that memory conceived as narration is crucial” (*Traumatic Cures* 131). Carr (119) also argues that although stories may distort reality to some degree, they are utterly important for life. It is actually the dynamic quality of memories and of narratives that makes healing from trauma possible.

Therefore, not the preservation of the trauma’s accuracy at the cost of the patient’s health, but the encouragement to recommence a meaningful life by re-gaining control over one’s memories and by “giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (Brison, *Aftermath* 71) should be the main goal of therapy. The traumatic memories or

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<sup>111</sup> Also mentioned in Feehily (190-191), LaCapra (*Holocaust Testimonies* 213) and Rose (43). Criglington also claims that “[l]anguage shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre” (86). Roland Barthes states that structuralism always reconstructs something and that “[s]tructure is therefore actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but directed, *interested* simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible” (*Structuralist Activity* 83).

<sup>112</sup> For a discussion of the differences in the theories of Freud and Janet see Leys (*Traumatic Cures* 120-132), Rabelhofer or Hacking (248-257).

experiences do not disappear, but in their transformed form they do no longer haunt and disrupt one's life narrative (J. Herman, *Trauma* 195, 211-212).

### ***Integrating trauma into one's life narrative and identity***

Finally, the claimed trauma which now can be narrated and interpreted as something meaningful has to be integrated into one's life narrative. Usually it becomes a nucleus; one which definitely turned the course of the narrative from what it once was leading to, but as soon as this nucleus is integrated one can start to re-establish one's life narrative and self, rediscover meaningful values and beliefs and find a new goal to live for.

In order to mend one's shattered self, one has to escape the prescribed and restrictive "subject-position" (LaCapra, *History* 12). As J. Herman also argues, the traumatized person has to find new concepts and relations, autonomy and the strength to become "the author and arbiter of her/[his] own recovery" (*Trauma* 133); they have to become agents and subjects (Brison, *Aftermath* 68; *Trauma Narratives* 39). Secondly, one has to combine one's past and present self, integrate the traumatized self and develop an idea for the future one (J. Herman 202; van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 28). To express it in Ricoeur's terms: In revising one's life narrative and (re)claiming one's identity, a person must recreate the continuity of one's character and keep or recall former promises and create new ones. One cannot simply take a blank sheet and start a new life narrative. Our former chapters and promises have to be re-claimed, because they partly define who we are and how we have become that person.

To restore one's life narrative one has to recall and retrieve the important nuclei and regain the bits and pieces of memories, knowledge, experiences (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 255 qtd. in Brison, *Aftermath* 49; J. Herman, *Trauma* 176) and join these fragments of the former life narrative with the now claimed traumatic experiences (Brison, *Aftermath* x)<sup>113</sup>. This joining together enables the person to re-create continuity from the past to present and future and to maintain the coherence and causality in the narrative; the trauma is thus put in a larger context, which may lead to an even deeper understanding of its meaning or impact (Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 39-40). Furthermore, there should be a synthesis between the concordant elements and those discordant ones which

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<sup>113</sup> See also Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (26).

resulted from the trauma. Thus the narrative will once again have a purpose and be meaningful and future-oriented. If one has achieved this and is able to continue the narrative, then one can speak of post-traumatic growth, because although one “[has] encountered the fear of death, [one now] knows how to celebrate life” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 213).

However, there are still some obstacles where people may fail to reclaim their experience and do not integrate their trauma into their life narrative and thus cannot restore its meaning and continuity nor re-establish a self. Trauma is always linked to some irretrievable loss (J. Herman, *Trauma* 188) and a narrative about trauma thus must always be a narrative involving grief and mourning. People may avoid such narratives, because they fear never to recover once they have allowed themselves to let the grief in, or they may also have to deal with anger and the wish for revenge. However, both avoidance and anger lead to stagnation in the healing process (J. Herman, *Trauma* 188-189). Mourning is absolutely necessary, because it “is the only way to give due honor to loss” (J. Herman, *Trauma* 190) and it “leads to acceptance and understanding, which of itself is a form of healing” (Duffy 52). LaCapra further claims that “[i]n mourning one recognizes a loss as a loss yet in time is able to take (partial) leave of it, begin again, renew interest in life, and find relatively stabilized objects of interest, love, and commitment” (*History and Memory* 184)<sup>114</sup>. Proper mourning thus transforms the trauma to such a degree that one can lay it to rest and integrate the loss into one’s life narrative. It is then no longer a void that devours everything, but merely a hole that can be crossed over. One can then look beyond it and focus on the future of one’s life narrative.

Anger or aggression should also be transformed; in the best case into forgiveness<sup>115</sup>. It is a kind of forgetting or disregarding of what happened, but not the complete erasure of the experiences (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 197; Whitehead, *Memory* 155). The past is rather re-evaluated and re-interpreted so that the trauma can be worked through and freed from its intrusive character and the person is able to see a future (Duffy 57-59). Through expanding one’s perspective to the perspective of others, one may even

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<sup>114</sup> See also LaCapra (*History* 213-214).

<sup>115</sup> See also J. Herman (*Trauma* 189-190).

sympathize with or understand them (Miller 415-417). This understanding and the resulting forgiveness then enables one to claim and integrate the trauma into one's life narrative.

After one has reclaimed the traumatic experience and re-constructed a life narrative and self, one can now develop new beliefs, confidence and trust towards the world and form (new) relationships (J. Herman, *Trauma* 196; Brison, *Aftermath* 60-61). "In accomplishing this work the survivor reclaims her world" (J. Herman, *Trauma* 196) and life after the trauma is now possible.

This way of coming to terms with trauma does also work for traumatized communities or societies. They have to claim the trauma and integrate it into their collective narrative and finally, like an individual, have to tell it to others who recognize the narrative as meaningful for the community.

### **5.2.2 Reading**

Reading or listening to narratives of others can also play a crucial role in one's recovery process. Through the "fusion of horizons" one is transported to a different time and place and is allowed to enter another world that is not frightening, since it is not one's own reality. There one may experience security and can forget oneself and one's problems for some time (Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 258). One may also identify or feel empathy with the characters and by watching them deal with their problems, traumatized people may start facing their own trauma. Reading "narratives [thus] can help a traumatised person to confront suppressed feelings" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 58) or, as Brison (*Aftermath* 73) argues, they can get aware of their own trauma.

Through following the narrative, people experience its logical, coherent and continuous plot structure which usually ends in a meaningful conclusion. Every reader might find another solution or interpretation (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 66), but the closed and ordered structure may help them to deal with the chaos in their own narrative that was shattered by trauma. They may take the narrative as model to order their own life narrative, to transform their trauma and to reclaim the continuity and meaning in

their life narrative and identity development (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 59-61). As pointed out in the section on narratology, narratives thus offer catharsis.

In a further step, “[t]raumatised people can be stimulated by the rich source of literary narratives to become creative artists in their own right, each one in her[/his] own way creating meaning out of chaos” (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 66-67). Such narratives can then be told to others who may again learn something from them. Through reading we therefore obviously reach out to one another. It includes hearing others’ narratives and interpreting them, and such shared narratives can even be the basis for a group’s identity (cf. van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 62-63).

On the basis of the above-mentioned points the psychologist P.J. Rossouw developed the so-called “bibliotherapy” (in van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 58-59), which, in a similar form, was also successfully used by Frankl (Riemeyer 83-84). “Es handelt sich bei Bibliothérapie um ‘gezieltes Verleihen’ von Büchern, wobei das Buch die Rolle des Mittlers übernimmt” (Riemeyer 84). The patient is encouraged to read texts that might deal with similar problems to her/his own and that portray characters with whom traumatized people may identify and thus may gain knowledge of how to deal with their own trauma.

Reading narratives thus serves as an impulse, a guideline for those people who do not have the strength or do not know how to start a trauma narrative of their own accord. Once they have found the motivation and gained the means to translate and claim their trauma they also have to go through the processes described in the preceding and the following sections.

### **5.2.3 Telling**

Once one has transformed trauma and integrated it into one’s life narrative, one can also reclaim one’s place in the world. It is finally in our interaction with others that we truly heal from trauma and succeed in recovering a meaningful life narrative and identity (Brison, *Aftermath* 51; *Trauma Narratives* 46; J. Herman, *Trauma* 133). As pointed out in the narratology section, it does not suffice to become narrator and author of one’s own narrative, but we need others to listen to and acknowledge our narrative and identity. On



the one hand, this proves one's ability to select those elements which one perceives as relevant and most interesting for the listeners. On the other hand we also entrust them with our narrative, establish relationships, exchange perspectives and thus become part of a collective narrative.

### *Testifying to oneself*

As has been stated before, traumatized people feel an "imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story" (Laub, *Event Without Witness* 78). By telling one's story to others one finally re-gains the role of an active author of one's life narrative. Testifying one's memories and experiences makes one their witness (Laub, *Event Without Witness* 85; *Truth and Testimony* 70) and this is the remedy against drifting into a life which is dominated by repressed and unclaimed trauma.

"It is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds – the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is" (Laub, *Truth and Testimony* 74). It presupposes one's acknowledgement of loss and one's re-living and the transformation of trauma into a narrative, but it finally helps one to regain closure and the possibility to go on with one's life. Those who choose silence and do not become witnesses to themselves and their lives will never be healed (Laub, *Event Without Witness* 79-80).

### *Witness and empathic listener*

It is however most important that those to whom we tell our life narrative, pay attention to it. In general, the narrating person needs room for interpretation and self-reflection, but they also need this attachment to another person and the help of the listener to link and order the fragments, to develop and interpret the narrative's meaning or create new ones and one's role in it (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 27; Laub, *Bearing Witness* 71)<sup>116</sup>.

There are now two categories of possible listeners. They can be mere witnesses who understand and acknowledge one's narrative, but in order to be healed "one's trauma narrative has to be received by an empathic listener" (van der Merwe and Gobodo-

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<sup>116</sup> Also in J. Herman, *Trauma* (179).

Madikizela 27)<sup>117</sup>. This sort of listener also acts as a witness, but s/he does not only accept and acknowledge the trauma and the narrative about it and ensures one of trust and understanding, but additionally offers empathic companionship. S/he stays by one's side, and shows her/him that one's suffering is not senseless, but meaningful (cf. van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 428).

However, both empathic and non-empathic witnessing is a difficult task to be accomplished. One needs to bear in mind that the traumatized person has within her/himself an unclaimed, fragmented or at least frightening and painful experience that s/he only recollects with difficulty (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 58). Laub (*Bearing Witness* 57) states that sometimes those who suffer from a trauma have not yet witnessed what happened to them themselves and that they actually come to know their trauma during the process of telling it to others. In every case, the witness "must *listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech" (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 58). The one who testifies needs a witness who assures him that his account is heard (Miller and Tougaw 11). Only when s/he feels that the listener is ready and willing to listen to an absence or fragmented account, s/he might find the courage to speak (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 64). If they lack this "addressable other", it can be more fatal than the trauma itself, because it "annihilates the story" (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 68).

Of course, the process of telling a trauma narrative is painful for both speaker and listener, and especially the latter is tempted to reject, deny, distort or trivialize the painful and horrific narratives and victimize its narrators in order to defend his own peace and integrity (Caruth, *Interview* 139; cf. Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 50; Laub, *Bearing Witness* 72-73). This however, is bearing "false witness" (Caruth, *Interview* 139) and it may reinforce the traumatization. Individuals as well as societies thus ought to prevent a trivialization of trauma (Brison, *Aftermath* 57-58; *Trauma Narratives* 49) and not blame the victims for their traumas and turn them into scapegoats and outsiders (McFarlane and van der Kolk 35).

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<sup>117</sup> See also Brison (*Aftermath* 62) and Laub (*Bearing Witness* 69).

While a witness listens to and acknowledges the speaker's narrative, an empathic listener may even enter their narrative and experience their trauma and pain like they did. This means of course only "being a survivor by proxy" (Caruth *Interview* 145), but it is this proxy witnessing which is important. Some traumatized people need this shared experiencing and identification of the listener to feel that they and their trauma narrative have been truly acknowledged. However, especially in this case the listener's freedom is at stake as well. S/he experiences the fear, the pain and the destruction of former beliefs and values that the trauma inflicted on the victim (Laub, *Bearing Witness* 72) and at some point the listener may even feel something like "Empathiestreß" (Fischer 16), that is, sometimes listeners thus vividly identify with the victim that they may adopt the trauma as their own and thus become traumatized themselves (LaCapra, *Holocaust Testimonies* 220; J. Herman, *Trauma* 140<sup>118</sup>).

However, only if the traumatized person can tell her/his trauma narrative, which has been integrated into their life narrative and interpreted as meaningful, to others s/he can be healed completely. They need them to bear witness to this narrative; they have to understand and recognize its meaning and its intended purpose. Then the traumatized person may again re-establish a place in a community. According to van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, this "is the importance of story-telling: to bring us together and to connect us" (28).

### *Traumatized communities*

Sometimes the witnessing and sharing of trauma narratives can lead to traumatized communities. In this case several people have more or less gone through the same or similar traumatic experiences and suffer from comparable traumatic memories and, as Farrell (18) claims, shared trauma may lead to bonds among its victims. Those people understand each other in their pain and estrangement and form helping and caring relationships to support each other (McFarlane and van der Kolk 25). They may even "define themselves according to the past traumas or symptoms of their members" (Turner, McFarlane and van der Kolk 550) and thus can take over a traumatized but still recognized and accepted group identity.

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<sup>118</sup> J. Herman (*Trauma* 140) terms it "traumatic countertransference" and LaCapra speaks of "empathic unsettlement" (*Holocaust Testimonies* 220).

Trauma can therefore have unifying functions (van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart 433). The members of a traumatized community keep together, because they are all outsiders in the ‘normal’ community (Erikson, *Notes* 194) and often the first formulation of traumatic experiences into words takes place in such groups. They may even be able to claim their collective trauma and translate it into a narrative that is accepted by all the groups’ members. They thus become a homogenous body, united through one shared trauma narrative. Sometimes they may even see themselves as members of a “‘secret order’ that is sworn to silence” (Laub, *Event Without Witness* 82)<sup>119</sup>.

As this term already implies, they usually isolate themselves from others and exclude the not traumatized part of the society or culture (Erikson, *Notes* 189). In turn, those who have not been affected by the trauma do not understand them and distance themselves from the traumatized community. Unable to communicate their collective trauma narrative, the members of the traumatized community thus cannot be totally healed, but remain one large traumatized unit. Within the community, however, they help each other and offer understanding, comfort and a feeling of unity. Their major goal is to carry each other through life and witness each other’s life narratives. They are thus not totally stagnated in their trauma.

### 5.3 THE CASE OF THE HOLOCAUST

Within the healing process the Holocaust has once again a unique position. If one believes Adorno’s dictum that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34) or Postmodernist theories which underline the unrepresentability of trauma, it is unlikely that traumas resulting from the Holocaust can be healed through narratives<sup>120</sup>. There are, however, several critics who disagree with this idea: According to LaCapra (*History and Memory* 181), Adorno’s statement is less a prohibition than a description of the difficulty to clothe trauma into language or the dangers of using imagination to represent such a disturbing reality. In addition, philosopher Gillian Rose criticizes postmodernism

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<sup>119</sup> Frankl, e.g., mentions this pact of understanding among survivors: “Wir sprechen nicht gerne über unser Erlebnis: wer selber in einem Lager war, dem brauchen wir nichts zu erklären; und wer es nicht war, dem werden wir nie begreiflich machen, wie es in uns ausgesehen hat – und wie es auch jetzt noch in uns aussieht” (Frankl, *Ja zum Leben* 21).

<sup>120</sup> See also Miller and Tougaw (8).

as a “[d]espairing rationalism without reason” (7). Its argument concerning the apparently impossible representation of the Holocaust does not lead to anything; only if one allows breaking this eternal circle, peace and order might be had (Rose 12). One should therefore abandon the idea that the Holocaust is “ineffable” (Rose 43) and, instead try to work through it, to question and claim the various components and the roles of the participants and to mourn the losses properly in order to lay the trauma to rest.

Indeed, there are numerous autobiographies, memoirs and even more narratives (the novels by Anne Michaels are only two of them) which try to represent it (cf. Miller and Tougaw 2-3) and thus find healing for it. Trauma and its truth may make narrating difficult, but “the truth does not kill the possibility of art” (Felman, *The Return* 206). King even argues that “[t]he dislocation of individual identity and memory, of temporality, of ethical categories and of meaning effected by the Holocaust seems to demand recognition in the art which seeks to represent it” (125).

## **6 FUGITIVE PIECES AND THE WINTER VAULT: NOVELS ABOUT WAYS OF HEALING**

It has been claimed that *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault* are not only novels about trauma, but also novels about recovery (cf. Rosen). As Michaels comments on *Fugitive Pieces*: “Part of it is the question of how one carries on after the worst thing. And if one is to find faith, create a faith for oneself in life, how does one even begin to do that out of moral, personal, social catastrophe?” (Interview with Tihany qtd. in Howells 107-108) She thus clearly deals with the question how one may proceed and create a meaningful future after trauma<sup>121</sup>.

This last chapter therefore investigates to which degree the characters in Anne Michaels’s novels use narrative, whether and how the above described methods to come to terms with their traumas are reflected and whether they succeed in claiming and telling it and consequently can establish a meaningful life narrative, identity and future.

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<sup>121</sup> In *The Winter Vault* Avery’s father touches the same point by stating “nothing proves the existence of a future like a question” (Michaels, *TWV* 122).

As the first part will show, almost all characters indulge in some kind of narrating and both novels depict the three components of the healing process. The second part will then trace the differences between the recovery through narrative as depicted in the novels and the one practised in actual psychotherapy.

## **6.1 FUGITIVE PIECES**

### **6.1.1 Jakob and Athos**

In their healing process Jakob and Athos strongly depend on each other. They run through similar steps and continually help each other to translate their traumas and reformulate their life narratives. However, as Krote argues, “[f]or both Athos and Jakob, writing plays an important role in re-creating a meaningful existence” (519)<sup>122</sup>.

#### *Athos and his lessons about life narrative*

As an archaeologist, it is Athos’s job to discover buried, lost or forgotten narratives (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 61). He has to put pieces back together, preserve them, interpret their meaning and then present them to the world. He has to integrate the small fragments into the larger narrative of history. As Howell claims, “[t]he archaeological metaphor with its sedimentation of history and repressed memories is a way of writing what is unspeakable” (110). This ‘narrative’ component of his profession enables him on the one hand to understand his own life and the world around him. On the other hand he knows about the healing potential of narrative and thus uses his work and knowledge to help others. This becomes most obvious in his relationship to Jakob. Athos does not only save Jakob, but he also feels entitled to “take care of [Jakob’s] soul” (Michaels, *FP* 97); in other words, he wants to restore Jakob’s identity and life narrative.

In the course of the novel Jakob is reborn in several ways (Michaels, *FP* 5)<sup>123</sup>; it starts with Athos and ends with Michaela. As Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 255) points out, especially Jakob’s rescue by Athos is described using images from pregnancy and birth:

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<sup>122</sup> Anker (60) claims that the novel emphasizes the importance of writing as means to preserve and to come to terms with the past.

<sup>123</sup> See also Bölling (189) or Hillger, who adds that Jakob is “described as the ‘afterbirth of earth’ ([Michaels, *FP*] 5)” (31).

Athos “[wears] [the boy] under his clothes” (Michaels, *FP* 13) and “[f]rom out of his trousers he [plucks] the seven-year-old refugee Jakob” (Michaels, *FP* 14). He then starts his restoration of Jakob in the same way he restores lost artefacts, namely by reclaiming their story and giving them meaning. According to Gubar, the novel “emphasizes rebirth made possible through escape, self-protective concealment, and excavation, three strategies later linked to the activities of reading and writing” (*Empathic Identification* 255).

As a first step, Athos helps Jakob to move on by offering him stories about the exploration of Antarctica as an escape from the dark reality for some time<sup>124</sup> and his own life narrative as a new basis (Michaels, *FP* 25-29). Jakob “understood that if [he] were strong enough to accept it, [he] was being offered a second history” (Michaels, *FP* 20) and indeed “Athos’s stories gradually veered [him] from [his] past” (Michaels, *FP* 28)<sup>125</sup>. Furthermore, Athos shows him how to use geography, geology and archaeology as metaphors to understand suffering, social and cultural changes, death, cruelty and violence and thus make sense of the world around him (cf. Omhově 88-89). Especially the idea of earth memory (see Michaels, *FP* 76), i.e., that earth or landscapes<sup>126</sup> can offer a new home or can store grief and memories (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 57; Rosen; King 27)<sup>127</sup>, helps Jakob to deal with his grief<sup>128</sup>. For example, he sees his own loss and sadness reflected in the ruins of Greece (cf. Kandiyoti 316- 317): “I stood in the valleys and imagined the grief of the hills. I felt my own grief expressed there” (Michaels, *FP* 60)<sup>129</sup>. Later he will relate the losses and suffering of Canada’s First Nation (e.g., Michaels, *FP* 102) to the Holocaust and thus finds consolation in the course of history. Their fate shows him that destruction and loss also brings about new life and new hope (Krote 527; Criglington 94): “Athos’s backward glance gave me a backward hope. Redemption through cataclysm” (Michaels, *FP* 101).

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<sup>124</sup> See also Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 258).

<sup>125</sup> See also Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 62).

<sup>126</sup> For an elaborate discussion on trauma and place in *Fugitive Pieces* see Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* chapter 3) or Kandiyoti’s article.

<sup>127</sup> See also Howells (110-111).

<sup>128</sup> Coffey relates the importance of landscapes to the genre of pastoral elegy (esp. in Athos’s case), in which “the mourner’s grief is displaced onto nature” (31).

<sup>129</sup> Compare this to the loss of Jean and Avery: “[W]hen their child died, Avery felt Jean’s suffering and his own, in the ache of the cliff, in the silent villages, in the new settlement of Khashm el Girba, in the heinous consolation of the rebuilt temples” (Michaels, *TWV* 176-177).

Coffey (43) claims that Athos's narratives and the peculiar use of his geological and geographical knowledge to transform reality are just an avoidance mechanism on his part and thus not to be recommended. In fact, Jakob takes this "familiar drug" (Michaels, *FP* 119) as means to avoid and repress his trauma, but in time he will also use them to make sense of what he experiences and claim his traumatic memories and thus they have a clearly positive impact on him<sup>130</sup>. Through 'reading' Athos's narratives, Jakob has learnt important lessons: e.g., that grieving and mourning takes its time (Parry 360), that friendship and love are most important (Krote 530) or that you should "look carefully; record what you see. Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful" (Michaels, *FP* 44) – in other words, one's soul can be healed, if one is able to see beauty in ordinary things and can produce something beautiful in the necessity of a situation (cf. Krote 526)<sup>131</sup>. These narratives and analogies are not enough to stop the intrusions of Jakob's traumatic memories or to put his trauma and his mourning into words, but he will use the imagery in his poetry, like *Groundwork*, and his memoirs (Omhovère 88).

Athos also teaches Jakob not to mystify his rescue and survival and thus evade the need to face his trauma. He encourages him to interpret his flight in such a way that it gets meaningful and that Jakob sees himself as an agent who actively decided upon his fate: "There was luck in our meeting, Jakob, but first you had to run" (Michaels, *FP* 84)<sup>132</sup>. Parry also claims that "Athos makes clear that the courage to take such a risk depended for Jakob upon actively seeking to use again that capacity to love which has caused him so much pain." (361). According to Frankl's theory, it is Jakob's responsibility to reclaim his past and understand its meaning for him, to decide how he wants to interpret his experiences and which decisions he wants to take for his future. He should not attribute his survival to mere coincidence. Again Athos expresses exactly this need for

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<sup>130</sup> This "reading" of nature and natural processes through which characters learn about their own lives occurs constantly in *Fugitive Pieces*. According to Omhovère, especially geology, through its metaphorical use "serves as a vector for the expression of individual grief. But even more importantly, it opens a discursive ground from which to address and collectively mourn the dispersal of countless nameless victims" (84).

<sup>131</sup> As will be shown later (page 115), this is also what Ben's parents achieved and could hand down to their son.

<sup>132</sup> See also Parry (361), who claims that Athos does not allow Jakob to mystify everything, but tries to make him aware of his own decisions and responsibility.



Jakob to search for meaning and thus resist stagnation: “I can’t save a boy from a burning building. Instead he must save me from the attempt; he must jump to earth.” (Michaels, *FP* 45). This retrieval of meaning will be a hard task for Jakob, but in the end he realizes that even in suffering there is meaning and a lesson to be learnt; one has just to interpret it in a meaningful way. For example, one can decide that “[t]he great mystery of wood is not that it burns, but that it floats” (Michaels, *FP* 28)<sup>133</sup> and the meaning in Jakob’s survival is that he actually “survives at times when ideological superstructures have failed to provide a ground for existence” (Hillger 39)<sup>134</sup>.

Athos proves further skills in his treatment of Jakob’s trauma when he “didn’t want me to forget. He made me review my Hebrew alphabet. He said the same thing every day: ‘It is your future you are remembering.’” (Michaels, *FP* 21). Athos knows that a person needs to have a coherent and continual life narrative and identity to make one’s life meaningful. He wants to make Jakob aware of the importance of his past, his origin and roots, and advises him not to repress them, but see their relation to his present and future (Bölling 190). Jakob should acknowledge his past as part of his life narrative and Athos therefore tries to “[replace] parts of [Jakob] slowly, as if he were preserving wood” (Michaels, *FP* 144). Only by integrating his traumatic experiences in his life narrative and his identity and re-establishing continuity within it, Jakob will be able to move on. Therefore Athos encourages him to tell him about his past and never stops his search for Bella, because he knows that the knowledge of how she died will be crucial for Jakob one day. Athos, therefore, “verfügt über ein ausgeprägtes Bewußtsein für die Familiengeschichte” (Bölling 189); for him, amnesia or the neglect of memory, is a sort of sin (Cook 20).

### *Athos’s narrative about his trauma*

Athos himself lives what he preaches: he exemplifies to Jakob how he should take care of his past and his trauma (Bölling 190). During the war he acts as chronicler (cf. Michaels, *FP* 43), and when he meets with his old friends Daphne and Kostas in Athens they start to narrate to each other everything they have witnessed and experienced. They all feel an urge to do so, “as if everything must be told in a single day” (Michaels, *FP*

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<sup>133</sup> For another interpretation of this quote see Krote (529).

<sup>134</sup> See also Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 61).

62) and they do not stop until “[t]hey were leaning back in their chairs in a silent melancholy, as if the long Greek dusk had finally drawn every memory out of their hearts” (Michaels, *FP* 63). In contrast to Jakob, who does not yet understand that one has to claim and tell one’s trauma, it appears strange that “Athos could speak about it, he needed to speak of it” (Michaels, *FP* 118).

In Canada Athos tries to come to terms with the haunting trauma that resulted from the loss of his colleagues by writing a book. In this case, Athos also “figures as the teacher of history” (Hillger 30), because angered by the Nazi’s success in distorting the archaeological facts and their successful construction of a wrong collective memory (in Halbwachs’s terms), he attempts to set it right. He tries to commemorate and represent his colleagues who can no longer contribute their version of history (Hillger 31), thus giving voice to their lost narratives (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 70). He sees it indeed as “a debt left unpaid to his colleagues” (Michaels, *FP* 103) which “plagued Athos. It was his conscience” (Michaels, *FP* 104). He knows that he has to write this narrative, his testimony as a witness, because otherwise his trauma will haunt him and he will never lay it to rest. His dedication to his lost colleagues is the last and probably most important message he gives to Jakob: “Murder steals from a man his future. It steals from him his own death. But it must not steal from him his life” (Michaels, *FP* 120) – therefore, narrate your life and make sure that you leave your narrative behind; either in the form of a written document or somehow entrusted to another person.

### ***Athos as Jakob’s companion, empathic listener and witness***

Athos also knows about the need of a person bearing witness to one’s narrative and about the essential role an empathic listener plays in the healing process. Therefore, one of the first things he says to Jakob is that “[w]e must carry each other. If we don’t have this, what are we...” (Michaels, *FP* 14). In order to survive and to re-establish some meaning and safety in their lives, those two will indeed depend on listening to each other’s narratives (cf. Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 256). Jakob gives meaning to Athos’s life, who, after his wife’s death rather lived isolated in the past. In turn, Jakob is rescued and offered a new identity as Athos’s foster son and pupil.

Especially because of his previous traumas, Athos is familiar with the loss of loved ones and can pass on this knowledge (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 61) and offer Jakob understanding (Zeitlin 188), help, companionship and love. This prevents Jakob's total withdrawal from the world and helps him to come gradually to terms with his trauma. Athos's friends, Daphne and Kostas, also approach Jakob with empathy and love and this "luxury of their affection brought feeling to [him]" (Michaels, *FP* 73) and later Jakob is also surrounded by friends like Maurice and Irena (Michaels, *FP* 120), who love him. Despite this, however, "he continues to suffer, we might say, from an unbearable grief of overattachment" (Zeitlin 182) to the dead and as long as he cannot let them go, he cannot enjoy what is offered to him, nor plan a future.

### ***Jakob's long way toward a narrative***

Nevertheless, Athos with his enormous efforts and all his empathy and understanding has paved the way for Jakob's recovery. He knows from the beginning that he has to transform his trauma by translating it into some language and that the continuity and meaningfulness of his life narrative depends on his success in claiming and integrating his traumatic experiences and memories. He is also aware that he has to narrate them for several reasons, namely "to memorialize those who are in danger of being forgotten [...] to remain present to the impossible task of representing what is essentially inconceivable and therefore unrepresentable. Perhaps most compulsively, however, he writes in order to achieve subject-hood, in order to know who he once was and who he is now" (Cook 15).

Jakob tries to claim his trauma and re-establish meaning in his life and resume his life narrative already very early in his life, but the special character of his trauma makes it hard for him to claim it completely. On the one hand, the dead continue to haunt him and on the other hand, he struggles to get the whole picture, to remember and re-construct what happened and to link his past with his present, but the fragments are often too horrible for him to recall. Drawn between this urge to tell and the wish to forget, Jakob often does not know where or how to begin claiming his trauma.

He generally uses poems and foreign languages as forms of consolation and means for claiming and recovering from his trauma (King 145; Rosen; Krote 525). Already in

Greece, he makes his first attempts in poetry (Michaels, *FP* 58). Jakob realizes that in “poetry, [there is] the power of language to restore [and] this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach [him]” (Michaels, *FP* 79). Those two gave him not only the idea of writing poetry, but they also provided him with the means to create it. At this early stage language, that is Greek and later English, plays a crucial role in his recovery process. At the beginning Jakob uses the foreign tongues to avoid his trauma: “I longed to cleanse my mouth of memory” (Michaels, *FP* 22); even later “I tried to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words” (Michaels, *FP* 93), but his efforts are in vain. In this respect, language fails Jakob and he even feels that his trauma “could not be stored in any language but only in silence” (Michaels, *FP* 111). Nevertheless, he struggles and experiments, still trying to put his trauma into words.

Finally, he chooses English<sup>135</sup> and thus being “[f]luent in Greek, haunted by the loss of Yiddish and Polish, Jacob [sic] expresses himself in a lexicon at several removes from his mother tongue” (Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 260). However, “[t]he English language was food. I shoved it into my mouth, hungry for it. A gush of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced” (Michaels, *FP* 92). According to Gubar (*Prosopopoeia* 117), it is indeed only the English language that is untainted by the Holocaust<sup>136</sup> and thus can help Jakob to put his trauma into words, but its sounds still do not follow his wishes: “Bella and I inches apart, the wall between us. I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language” (Michaels, *FP* 111), but “all I achieved was awkward shrieking” (Michaels, *FP* 112). It takes time until he has the linguistic as well as pragmatic competence to express himself fluently and appropriately (Michaels, *FP* 95, 100); until he can narrate what troubles him, translate his past into words and formulate a narrative. But as soon as “I began to write down the events of my childhood in a language foreign to their happening, it was a revelation.

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<sup>135</sup> Lucjan has a similar attitude toward language. English opened a new horizon, a new world and future to him; it is an untainted language, promising a world beyond the hell of Warsaw. Like Jakob, Lucjan learnt it feeling “hungry for a world outside. [...] This was not Polish or Russian but a bitter, clean language of escape.” (Michaels, *TWV* 230).

<sup>136</sup> Gubar (*Prosopopoeia* 117-119) claims that many survivors felt an estrangement to the languages of their former culture that was destroyed by the Holocaust and English was remote to what happened on the continent and hardly spoken by those who were traumatized by the Holocaust.

English could protect me; an alphabet without memory” (Michaels, *FP* 101). As King argues, language becomes “a mode of salvation” (140) which has the power for redemption (Krote 525)<sup>137</sup>.

Jakob needs yet to take several other detours to gain the ability to put his traumatic experiences and memories into words. Before he becomes an acknowledged and celebrated poet he works as a translator. While “[t]he poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life”, but both “try to identify the invisible” (Michaels, *FP* 109). He claims that “translating of one sort or another has supported me ever since” (Michaels, *FP* 108) and indeed, what he does in the end is just translating his trauma into a narrative.

According to Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 260) another stage in Jakob’s healing process is his partial recovery through finishing Athos’s book. By doing so he claims and narrates Athos’s trauma as a proxy-writer. He takes over Athos’s legacy, traces his life from past to present and gives it meaning and additionally develops his own skills further, but he knows that “for [him], the descent would go on and on” (Michaels, *FP* 120).

His *Groundwork*, a collection of poems dedicated to his parents and Bella, is then a first attempt of transforming his trauma and his past into a narrative (Hillger 35). On the island of Idhra Jakob “travel[s] out of the past” (Michaels, *FP* 154) and starts to reframe his interpretation of his former life narrative. He realizes that he kept his trauma unclaimed, afraid of distorting it or losing the memories (Michaels, *FP* 169), but now he no longer shrinks away. He “finally began to feel [that his] English [is] strong enough to carry experience” (Michaels, *FP* 162)<sup>138</sup> and starts to face and reflect upon his traumas (Michaels, *FP* 159) and thus slowly comes to terms with them:

There are places that claim you and places that warn you away. [...] In Athos’s room, in the house of his father. I heard the cries and they grew louder, filled my head. I moved closer inside myself, didn’t turn away. I clutched the sides of the desk and was pulled down into the blueness. I lost myself, discovered the world could disappear. During long evenings, in the blush of the lamp, in the purity of white pages. (Michaels, *FP* 157)

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<sup>137</sup> See also Howells (110).

<sup>138</sup> See also Anker (63-64).

Once he only wrote “ghost stories” (Michaels, *FP* 163), but now Jakob “[tries] to embroider darkness, black sutures with [his] glinting stones sewn safe and tight, buried in the cloth” (Michaels, *FP* 164). The cloth is of course his narrative that is gradually woven, and the stones are all his experiences and the memories of those he loved; the nuclei of his life narrative he yet has to order and link. Through writing poetry, he thus slowly starts to claim and integrate his trauma in his life narrative (cf. Quennet).

### *The problem with Bella’s lost story*

The most difficult task is however yet ahead of him, namely the claiming of the trauma stemming from Bella’s unknown fate. Jakob very early tries to refer to his sister through a transitional object<sup>139</sup>. He knows that life is so much easier and more meaningful if one can “[carry] a favoured item to the ends of the earth, if only to help [one] believe [one]’d see its beloved owner again” (Michaels, *FP* 36)<sup>140</sup>. Therefore, he tries to keep her close through listening to her music: “Of Bella’s belongings, I have the intermezzos, ‘The Moonlight,’ other pianoworks that suddenly recover me” (Michaels, *FP* 141). However, her music is not enough to mourn her or to lay her to rest. He needs to know her story, but it takes him a long time to bring himself to think about Bella’s fate or even to look for proofs. When Athos started searching for her traces as soon as they reached Athens, Jakob states that he had to “search so that I could give up. I found his faith unbearable” (Michaels, *FP* 59). Only after his separation from Alex his “stories shift from fictive reconfigurations of his traumatic abandonment to reconstructions of Bella’s progress toward death” (Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 261). He now tries to reconstruct his sister’s fate using the numbers and facts about the Holocaust (Bölling 192)<sup>141</sup>:

My eagerness for details is offensive [...]. Night after night, I endlessly follow Bella’s path from the front door of my parents’ house. In order to give her death a place. This becomes my task. I collect facts, trying to reconstruct events in minute detail. Because Bella might have died anywhere along that route. In the street, in the train, in the barracks. (Michaels, *FP* 139)

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<sup>139</sup> Schwab calls them “transformational objects [...] [which allow] one to live and eventually transform pain and to carry the task of mourning and integration beyond replacement and substitution” (302). See also J. Herman (*Trauma* 81) for a different definition.

<sup>140</sup> Compare this image to Laub’s (*Bearing Witness* 86-92 or *Truth and Testimony* 70-75) description of the boy who found the strength to survive the Holocaust only by holding on to a photo of his mother.

<sup>141</sup> Anker (63), e.g., claims that he puts her among the dead bodies on the photographs he saw.

But those facts are not enough. In a further step he starts to imagine how her life in one of the camps might have been and thus creates a narrative about her end (Zeitlin 183). For this purpose he links his personal memories of her, especially of her love for music, to his knowledge about the life in the concentration camps:

I want to remain close to Bella. To do so, I blaspheme by imagining. At night the wooden bunk wears through her skin. Icy feet push into the back of Bella's head. *Now I will begin the intermezzo. I must not begin too slowly.* There is no room. Bella's arms cover herself. *At night when everyone is awake, I will not listen to the crying. I will play the whole piece on my arms.* Her skin is coming apart at her elbows and behind her ears. *Not too much pedal, you can spoil Brahms with too much pedal [...]* The cuts on Bella's head are burning. She closes her eyes. *After the intermezzo I will practise parts of the Hammerklavier. By then most of the barrack will be asleep.* (Michaels, *FP* 167-168)

Despite his awareness that he is tampering with reality, his wish to claim his sister's story and to commemorate her is stronger (Bölling 193). His mere imaginations fulfil their purpose<sup>142</sup>: He is able to give Bella a place to rest and to integrate the traumatic loss into his life narrative (Bölling 193, 196). He can claim the haunting hole Bella's disappearance left behind; even if it is just filled with a fictive narrative (Williams and Polatinsky 10). Michaels here shows that "whilst unable to speak for the dead, or forgive on their behalf, [one] can acknowledge their loss" (King 144). He finally realizes that "*Bella, my brokenness has kept you broken*" (Michaels, *FP* 169) and that "*To remain with the dead is to abandon them*" (Michaels, *FP* 170). This is one of Jakob's epiphanies (Zeitlin 185) and the first real step toward his complete recovery.

### ***Bearing witness to the Holocaust and dealing with unreliable memory***

This insight is also relevant for another aspect of his traumatization. It has been pointed out that Jakob, as well as Ben, feels responsible to bear the burden of the memory and the untold narratives of those who died during the Holocaust (Bölling 196). Like Athos before him, who also felt the urge to bear "true witness" to history and to preserve the memories of his colleagues, Jakob takes it as his duty to hand down his memories and his knowledge about the suffering of others as some sort of substitute narrative for their lost ones and thus give them back their voice (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 72). This

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<sup>142</sup> Whitehead, however, argues that "[f]aced with the reality of the Holocaust, the process of imaginative restoration cannot be sustained" (*Trauma Fiction* 56).

“need to bear witness stems not from feelings of guilt but rather from the need to fulfill a moral obligation to the dead” (Kugelmass 207-208); they have to be remembered and mourned and their stories have to be told.

Athos already knew about this necessity, and in order to avoid the development of aberrated memory, he decided that “[w]e must have a ceremony. For your parents, for the Jews of Crete, for all who have no one to recall their names.’ We threw camomile and poppies into the cobalt sea” (Michaels, *FP* 75). By doing this, Athos tries to “locate Jakob’s grief within the ritual processes of time” (Parry 360), and “to re-connect Jakob with society, to allow him” (Parry 360) recreate his narrative and to let go.

In this context Hillger speaks of the “moral imperative” that urges us to “do justice to those who have been silenced but also to redeem those who are still speaking” (28), because only if one “finds traces of hope in the past [...] [one can] achieve a redemption of the present” (29). As long as “the dead are everywhere but the ground” (Michaels, *FP* 8)<sup>143</sup>, as long as they cannot rest in their graves with their story told, they will come back, reinforcing on the survivors the imperative to tell. Jakob, bearing Athos’s teachings about the importance of witnessing in his mind (Cook 15), therefore decides to testify for and to pay his tribute to those who no longer can. He starts to look for information, to collect the hidden or lost pieces of their narratives<sup>144</sup> and to portray their experiences as accurately as he can, but at the same time knows that “I couldn’t even begin to imagine the trauma of their hearts, of being taken in the middle of their lives” (Michaels, *FP* 147). Their narratives are lost as is Bella’s and their sufferings are thus not to be faithfully presented and commemorated.

He realizes that witnessing the Holocaust is tremendously difficult, but “[i]t becomes vital to Jakob, once he begins to find out about the death camps, to establish [...] who exactly can stand in the place of the witness” (King 123). In his search for successful

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<sup>143</sup> See also Hillger (28).

<sup>144</sup> According to Anker, *Fugitive Pieces* concentrates on the idea of “narratives that are hidden or buried and must be retrieved gradually by the victim or witness – a process presented by the repeated reference to digging, excavating, archaeological activities, the formation of limestone, buried cities, silted rivers and sedimentary rock” (61). This once again evokes the theme of archaeology and Ben will also turn to a similar activity. Shocked by his own fragmented family history, he starts “to scavenge the Humber, collecting objects that had eroded from the early-spring banks” (Michaels, *FP* 253) and he also behaves like an archaeologist when he looks for Jakob’s legacy on Idhra (Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 268; Kandiyoti 324).



ways, he refers to the Jewish tradition of remembering and mourning their collective past (Hillger 30)<sup>145</sup>. Within this tradition all personal memories are treated as collective ones. Therefore, the “forefathers are referred to as ‘we,’ not ‘they.’ ‘When we were delivered from Egypt....’ This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past, but, more important, it collapses time” (Michaels, *FP* 159). Jakob sees himself as one of the chroniclers and as the representative of all those who can no longer tell their memories themselves (Bölling 188). With his poems and memoirs he gives them and his sister a voice (Bölling 188), but also a place to rest: “Each morning I write these words for you all. For Bella and Athos, for Alex, for Maurice and Irena, for Michaela. Here on Idhra, in this summer of 1992, I try to set down the past in the cramped space of a prayer” (Michaels, *FP* 191). Bella’s and the collective Jewish narratives and his own life fuse in his memoirs. Jakob comes to the conclusion that while history is “finished and closed” (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 68), memory can be redemptive and open a future:

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the Memorbucher, the names of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue. History and memory share events; that is, they share time and space. Every moment is two moments. (Michaels, *FP* 138)

Jakob has learnt that it is necessary to mourn and pay one’s tribute to the dead, to lay them to rest in order to move on. He takes it as his duty to write such Memorbucher<sup>146</sup> (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 77).

However, Jakob also has to acknowledge that time and narrative do not heal all wounds or holes left behind by trauma (King 15). Some memories remain forgotten and some events resist forever being claimed (King 24). He says: “If sound waves carry on to infinity, where are their screams now? I imagine them somewhere in the galaxy, moving forever towards the psalms” (Michaels, *FP* 54).

According to Cook (22), who echoes Caruth and Postmodernist critics by claiming that “something is always lost to translation, forgotten, erased, misrecognized or elided” (Cook 21), Michaels thus deals with the crisis of transforming trauma into language and

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<sup>145</sup> See also Criglington (87).

<sup>146</sup> For a definition and discussion of “Memorbücher” and their role in Jewish memory and history writing see Yerushalmi or Kugelmass and Boyarin.

distorting it. Both Jakob and Ben soon realize that memory, even if it is first-hand memory and not handed down, is however always mediated or even constructed by personal or collective narratives and therefore neither entirely accurate nor true. They see that once trauma is transformed and integrated into a narrative, it loses its intrusive character, but at the same time “it is a partial truth that is at once engendered and dispersed by the act of telling” (Cook 24). Especially Jakob is aware of this fact (Quennet). According to Omhové, “Jakob’s writing restores a possibility for mourning only when he comprehends that he cannot transpose devastation without engaging with loss much in the same way as the translator accepts losing the fullness of the foreign text while transposing it anew” (90). Language heals, but also leaves something out.

In the end Jakob and Ben however come to the same conclusion as many critics: Despite their subjectivity and inaccuracy, it is more important that our narratives and memories help us to interact and connect with others. As Ben later phrases it: “And whether you live by a lie or live by a truth makes no difference, as long as you get past the wall” (Michaels, *FP* 210).

### *Jakob’s search for the ultimate empathic listener*

However, Jakob still needs an empathic listener for his own narrative to come to terms with his personal trauma. Daphne and Kostas’s, Maurice’s and Athos’s love, understanding and companionship are not enough. He needs someone who acknowledges every aspect of his narrative and understands its complete meaning and feels his trauma as if it would be her/his own.

Alex, Jakob’s first wife, does not live up to these expectations. Quite on the contrary, she tries to make him forget his past and thus cannot but fail to help him to come to terms with it<sup>147</sup>. When Jakob meets her he attributes “eagerness, strength, and energy” (Michaels, *FP* 127) to her; all characteristics he lacks and thinks to be necessary for his recovery from trauma. Her vitality indeed helps him at first, but it also distances him from his past (King 142). She is too cheerful, loves life too much and in her presence he gradually feels himself estranged from Bella.

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<sup>147</sup> See also the discussions in Anker (62-63), Bölling (194) or Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 261).

Jakob feels as if she is brainwashing him (Michaels, *FP* 144), as if she wants him to forget his past and totally take over her Canadian ways (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 62): “Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood. But Alex – Alex wants to explode me, set fire to everything. She wants me to begin again” (Michaels, *FP* 144). Alex lacks the empathy Jakob would need and her way to deal with Jakob’s past is therefore inappropriate. She clearly rejects his attempts to share his trauma and tells her friends regretfully that she “[gets] more than enough history at home” (Michaels, *FP* 136). With her attitude she only pushes Jakob deeper into his trauma (Zeitlin 183). However, as Parry (362) argues, she never really knows about the actual quality of Jakob’s trauma, because he cannot share it with her. He simply feels that they do not fit, that he “had European circuitry, my voltage wrong for the socket” (Michaels, *FP* 132). On the other hand she maybe fears Jakob’s memories. She senses the horror they contain, the traumatic potential they also hold for her provided she would listen to them, and thus rather forces Jakob to repress them.

Through Alex, Jakob becomes aware how much he has changed, how far he has moved from the world of his childhood, from the identity and life he has planned for him and Mones or from the promises he gave himself and how little he has accomplished in laying the ghosts of his past to rest. He states:

Everything is wrong: the bedroom with its white furniture, the woman asleep beside me, my panic. For when I wake I know it’s not Bella who has vanished, but me. Bella, who is nowhere to be found, is looking for me. How will she ever find me here, beside this strange woman? Speaking this language, eating strange food, wearing these clothes. (Michaels, *FP* 126)

The unclaimed and not integrated trauma thus comes back to haunt him: his nightmares return (Michaels, *FP* 135, 141) and everything about Alex triggers his memories, his grief and his guilt.

Jakob, who once hoped that she would help him to come to terms with his trauma, realizes that she is not the right person to listen to his narrative (Michaels, *FP* 139): “She never understands; thinks, certainly, that she’s doing me good, returning me to the world, snatching me from the jaws of despair, rescuing me. And she is. But each time a memory or a story slinks away, it takes more of me with it” (Michaels, *FP* 144). He does not want to take the solution she offers him, does not want to start anew, but remains

fixed on the dead (Anker 63; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 62). She is rather an impediment to his quest of claiming his trauma (Howells 112), because Jakob, as Athos's pupil, feels that he cannot start as a new person. He needs his past, his former self and his memories to build a new future; he needs to find continuity in his life. When he notices that Alex does not understand this and that he can never accomplish a reformulation of his life narrative by her side, he decides to continue his quest alone (Michaels, *FP* 144-145).

Totally different is his experience with Michaela. She is the empathic listener Jakob has been waiting for (Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 262), because she is finally able to help him lay his past to rest, embrace the present and face a future (Hillger 36; Williams and Polatinsky 10; Bölling 194). Upon first meeting her, he already comments: "Her mind is a palace. She moves through history with the fluency of a spirit, mourns the burning of the library at Alexandria as if it happened yesterday" (Michaels, *FP* 176). This time-crossing attitude of Michaela and her ability to see the relation and influences between present and past already proves that she is fit to listen to Jakob's narrative with empathy (Criglington 96). Her job as an archaeologist and museum conservator actually includes finding and preserving lost items (Zeitlin 186). "Where Alex's restlessness and love of novelty suggests that she is future orientated, a talent for living with the past characterizes Michaela" (Criglington 96). But she gives him even more. Like Athos, Michaela shares her memories with Jakob and thus allows him to read her narrative (Michaels, *FP* 179, 185)<sup>148</sup>. It is Michaela's ability and will to listen with empathy and the sharing and witnessing of each other's narratives which finally heal Jakob.

In contrast to Alex, she does not want him to forget, but offers him acceptance and understanding for his past (Parry 362). This recognition of his trauma narrative enables him to lay the dead to rest (Krote 520; Bentley) and he finally finds his peace and home in Michaela's arms (Howells 113):

Michaela's hands above her head; I stroke the fragile place on the back of her smooth, soft upper arms. She is sobbing. She has heard everything – her heart an ear, her skin an ear. Michaela is crying for Bella. The light and heat of her tears

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<sup>148</sup> See also Bölling (195).

enter my bones. The joy of being recognized and the stabbing loss: recognized for the first time. When I finally fall asleep, the first sleep of my life, I dream of Michaela [...] Bella sits on the edge of the bed and asks Michaela to describe the feel of the bedcover [...] I wake as if I've been dug out of the dream and lifted into the world, a floating exhaustion. [...] Every cell in my body has been replaced, suffused with peace. (Michaels, *FP* 182)

This passage illustrates what a skilled empathic listener Michaela is. She hears everything, even the imagined parts of Jakob's story and understands and accepts them without discussion or advice. She does not only witness Jakob's trauma, but she even incorporates it to such a degree that she can feel his pain. She "'recognized' that first helplessness. And she 'recognized' the subsequent and repeated hopelessness of his being unable to rescue his sister [...] the gnawing hole in his being is slowly filled by the maternally sustaining nourishment Michaela provides" (Estrin 291). In this context we encounter again the archaeological metaphor and the idea of rebirth: Michaela digs Jakob out so that he reaches the air, the present (Anker 64) and is completely reborn.

Jakob is freed from his fixation on Bella through the body of Michaela (Krote 529; Gubar, *Empathic Identification* 262). Bella and the trauma resulting from her loss are transferred from the past into the present and she is no longer a ghost, but has become one part of Michaela, and therefore Jakob can release and bury her (King 147). Criglington in fact claims, that Michaels promotes the idea of "embodied memory" (89), i.e., that bodies (in this case the female bodies), like language, can store memory and thus heal the traumatized (male) characters.

Having found a witness to his narrative, Jakob can finally recall his past without being overwhelmed. He can remember his sister without pain or guilt and can find freedom in the moment (Anker 64-65; Bentley). Aberrated memory is finally turned into inaugurated one through the means of aesthetic representation and with the help and understanding of others (Parry 359). He is thus able to restore the continuity in his life narrative and to link his two selves: "Each night heals gaps between us until we are joined by the scar of dreams" (Michaels, *FP* 183).

Like Alex, Michaela also triggers memories, they are still two moments, but now he can differentiate between the present and the past and can see a future (Bentley). Gubar further claims that "empathic reading and writing and loving [...] achieve vis-à-vis

trauma [...] a collapsing of time, the making out of every moment a second moment through parallel images that serve an ethical function in literature” (*Empathic Identification* 264):

I watch Michaela bake a pie. [...] Unknowingly, her hands carry my memories. I remember my mother teaching Bella in the kitchen. [...] ‘If you’re thinking bad thoughts the cake won’t rise’ – and here’s Michaela cajoling the dough as she puts it in the oven, whispering to her pie to come out just right. (Michaels, *FP* 192-193)

These memories do no longer hurt and Jakob can recall them deliberately, he can go back and forth, link the past to the present and the future and this proves that the once traumatic memories are now narrative ones. Jakob has accepted his past and come to terms with his trauma. He now feels alive, earthed and realizes that “[t]here’s no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it’s given a use” (Michaels, *FP* 193)<sup>149</sup> or meaning. He is still conscious of his imperative to narrate, to tell what happened to his people and his family in particular, but he has learnt that his personal happiness and his future depend on his laying them to rest and looking forward and not backward (Bölling 195). The memories’ accuracy or completeness is thus not so important. He has found his peace, which is also reflected in the works he writes in his last years (Parry 362): They are “poems of a man who feels, for the first time, a future. Your words and your life no longer separate, after *decades of hiding in your skin*” (Michaels, *FP* 267).

He has accomplished what Athos told him: “Write to save yourself [...] and someday you’ll write because you’ve been saved” (Michaels, *FP* 165) and he can now even hand his knowledge down to others. He writes, for example: “Child I long for: if we conceive you, if you are born, if you reach the age I am now, sixty, I say this to you: Light the lamps but do not look for us. Think of us sometimes [...]. I pray that one day in a room lit only by night snow, you will suddenly know how miraculous is your parents’ love for each other” (Michaels, *FP* 194-195). In other words, he advises his child not to remain fixated on the past. To remember is necessary and helpful, but one should never forget to keep one’s eyes on the future.

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<sup>149</sup> See also Parry (362) or Omhové, who claims that Jakob “learn[s] to value absence for the longing it arouses and the impulse it gives to [his] wanderings and [his] writings” (93).

Jakob's hope for the future is now the conception of a child. Michaela's youth offers him this possibility to renew the circle of life. However, his untimely death prevents the fulfilment of this hope (Criglington 97). According to Krote, "Jakob is denied *perfect* redemption" (521)<sup>150</sup>, but Whitehead argues that if redemption is possible then it is not the usual kind. It is taken by the one who narrates the lost stories, who "recuperates and bears witness to the sufferings of the oppressed and conquered" (*Trauma Fiction* 69), of those who have not been heard. "Michaela's vision of redemption is based on salvaging and recording the stories of the victims of trauma" (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 74).

In any case, the important factor is that Jakob could successfully overcome his trauma. Finally, he has learnt Athos's lesson "to make love necessary" (Michaela, *FP* 121). He realizes that death is not the end of things, but only a door to future life. If one mourns one's losses properly and keeps one's heart open to love, then a meaningful and fulfilled life will not be impossible even after trauma. Having achieved this insight one could claim that his life has been successful, although he is killed in a car accident shortly afterwards.

### **6.1.2 Ben and his Parents**

Jakob's healing process, which is successful because of Athos's care and Michaela's empathy, is drastically contrasted to the traumatic family life described in Ben's narrative. While Jakob constantly encounters love and understanding and receives support, acceptance and sympathy and thus can compensate his loss, Ben experiences a different kind of care and guidance. His parents wish to keep him safe and happy by entrusting him with their less traumatic memories and their survival strategies, but they are incapable of creating a supporting and loving atmosphere. As a result they only traumatize their child.

#### ***A trauma shared is a trauma halved***

Ben's father and mother actually form a sort of traumatized group, within which they gain support, comfort and the strength to live from each other. They understand each

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<sup>150</sup> See also Coffey (36) and Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 272).

other without explanations, but the fear that those who did not experience what they did could not understand their situation nor imagine the depths of their suffering makes them withdraw from others. They hardly ever try to narrate their trauma even to their son. Indeed, Ben cannot, and probably does not want to understand his parents. In time, they therefore deliberately cast him out and concentrate merely on supporting each other.

This dependency on each other becomes especially obvious after Ben's mother dies. Having lost his companion, Ben's "father slipped beyond reach" (Michaels, *FP* 250). He now sees himself as left entirely alone, without any meaning or motivation for his life. He faces, as Frankl calls it, an "existential vacuum", and in the end, after all these years of fighting for life, when he cannot bear it any longer, he gives up and commits suicide by taking all his sleeping pills (Michaels, *FP* 256).

### ***Living in silence without a narrative***

Ben's "parents [obviously] did not find the narrative cure" (Anker 65) and Ben doubts "whether the two names on the back of my father's photograph, if they had ever been spoken, would have filled the silence of my parents' apartment" (Michaels, *FP* 280), whether it would have changed anything if they had tried to translate and claim their trauma.

With regard to his father, Ben is right to assume that he never tries to express his trauma but just looks for consolation in his music (Michaels, *FP* 215, 255). However, he forgets that his mother feels the need to talk and to share some of her memories with him. According to Rosenthal (72), it is common that only one partner narrates what happened, but she adds that the silent person usually suffered more than the other; something Ben in time likewise understands: "what my father had experienced was that much less bearable" (Michaels, *FP* 223).

### ***Ben and Naomi as witnesses***

His mother looks for a witness in her son, but her inability to transform her most traumatic experience into a narrative<sup>151</sup> distances her from Ben. The latter reacts with anger and stubbornness, thus rather increasing his parents' withdrawal. Ben in his

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<sup>151</sup> As claimed on page 46, she can only speak in a coded language.



jealousy, insecurity and with his ambiguous relationship to his parents is indeed not fit to become their empathic listener or even witness. His mother, who still feels the urge to tell someone of her trauma, thus chooses to hand it down to another safe-keeper in order to secure that the memories are passed on (Michaels, *FP* 252). In this way she may try to commemorate the death of her children<sup>152</sup>.

She confides in Naomi, who offers Ben's parents the understanding they need. She comes, not like a thunderstorm, but with tranquillity, love and acceptance of "[their] ways, never overstepping her position" (Michaels, *FP* 249); thus offering Ben's parents time and privacy. Ben, on the other hand, "resents her compassion and her ability to grieve with his parents and create a ritual of mourning for their loss" (Parry 362). Neither can he return the love she offers him (Parry 362), nor does he want to be included in this process, and deliberately withdraws.

### ***Ben's attempts in narrating***

He now looks for consolation and healing in creating narratives, although it will take its time until he can translate his trauma into words and approach recovery through telling his narrative.

Similar to Jakob's use of geology, Ben's first attempts in narrating are to relate meteorological events, like thunderstorms or floods to his family's history (Michaels, *FP* 222)<sup>153</sup>. Ben also sees his trauma reflected in the devastated landscape around Toronto after the flood and, like Athos, uses these natural catastrophes to make sense of human disasters (Coffey 44). According to Criglington, "*Fugitive Pieces* uses such vacant imagery to gesture toward the irredeemable while also demonstrating the necessity of working through grief by giving events shape and meaning" (93).

According to Eaglestone (18-19), the second generation generally tries to work through trauma and the traumatic memories handed down to them and try to narrate the untold stories of their parents. Ben also feels the imperative to commemorate and mourn the dead, he wants to give the unnamed faces of his father's pictures a story. Although

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<sup>152</sup> We can however only infer this intention, since the reader never has access to Ben's parents' minds. Their story is told by their son.

<sup>153</sup> See also Omhové (88).

unaware of the losses in his own family, he thus tries to bear witness to these absent family members: “They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be” (Michaels, *FP* 221). However, “[t]he quest to discover another’s psyche, to absorb another’s motives as deeply as your own, is a lover’s quest” (Michaels, *FP* 222), and to achieve this and find meaning in them is a difficult task. Ben fails to do so on his own, because he cannot even lay his parents and with them the haunting loss of his siblings to rest. He still carries them and their narratives as unclaimed memories inside himself. Additionally, his anger and jealousy hinder him to change his perspective and re-interpret his or his parents’ life narrative.

His coming to terms with his past and trauma is only set into motion by his reading Jakob’s works and searching for his notebooks (Bölling 182). The healing potential of narrative that can be gained through reading another person’s narrative is thus well illustrated by Ben’s case. Through his reading of Jakob’s poems and notebooks he comes to a better understanding of his own trauma. Only with the catharsis he gained from dealing with those texts, he is able to translate and transform his trauma and formulate a narrative about it and consequently can re-interpret and reformulate his life narrative.

The second half of the book deals with his attempt to come to terms with his past and to integrate it into his life narrative. He has not yet recovered totally, but he is already able to put his trauma into words. He takes the impulse from Jakob to put the silence into words and writes his story in retrospect. Ben’s part of *Fugitive Pieces* is thus “ein Instrument der Krisenbewältigung und der Selbstvergewisserung” (Bölling 182) and Ben clearly addresses Jakob as his interlocutor. He is like a son, learning from his adopted father the lessons of life and discussing them with him.

### ***Ben reading Jakob***

Ben comes across Jakob’s poems as a student and is strongly impressed by them. He sees in Jakob a person suffering from a similar pain and struggling with a comparable trauma and therefore identifies with him or even thinks of them as united in some kind of brotherhood<sup>154</sup>. Although he has not yet met him in person, Jakob becomes a friend

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<sup>154</sup> One could even claim that Ben tries to form a traumatized community with Jakob.

and an empathic listener who understands Ben and his misery. When he finally meets him, he is however disappointed: Jakob has already found his healing; he has moved beyond his trauma with the help of Michaela and Ben comments that

there seemed to be no gap between the poems and the man. How could it be otherwise, for a man who claimed to believe so completely in language? [...] I wanted to believe language itself had freed you. But the night we met I knew it wasn't language that had released you. [...] I knew I was standing on the bank watching, while you, long escaped from dusky rock, lay between the wet thighs of the river. (Michaels, *FP* 207)

He feels himself left alone again. His hopes of friendship and fellow suffering are crushed, his belief in the healing power of poetry is destroyed and his jealousy increases, especially, because Naomi seems to take to Jakob: "you didn't acknowledge me at all that night. But I saw Naomi open like a flower" (Michaels, *FP* 230). He feels again misunderstood, estranged from the man he imagined to be similar to himself, but who actually "no longer wishes to be found" (Michaels, *FP* 268). Jakob is at a place and has gained an identity that Ben also wants to reach (Howells 114) and he feels that Jakob is able to give him answers, but, at that moment and much in contrast to his wife, he is not yet ready to take them.

Although Ben very early realizes that Jakob needed an empathic listener, namely Michaela, to recover and also knows that "talk could actually heal" (Michaels, *FP* 208) he does not use this knowledge. The discovery of the photograph and Naomi's betrayal reinforce his anger and loneliness and he needs the help of Jakob's notebooks to solve his personal crisis (Bölling 183). He initially goes to look for them on behalf of Maurice, "who [also] longs for one last conversation" (Michaels, *FP* 261), but he ends up having his own "conversation" and gaining numerous insights through it. Which impact Jakob's notebooks have on Ben can be seen from his statement that "[y]our writing was neat and small, like a scientist's. But your words were not" (Michaels, *FP* 284).

Ben quite often addresses Jakob directly or quotes from his memoirs (Bölling 182) and poems (Michaels, *FP* 206, 207) and is clearly moved by those passages which relate to his own experiences:

I sat at your desk for a long time before I opened the first notebook. Then I read randomly. *Time is a blind guide... To remain with the dead is to abandon them...*

*One becomes undone by a photograph, by love that closes its mouth before calling a name... In the cave her hair makes... (Michaels, FP 284)*

Gradually, Ben is able to widen his horizon, to enter Jakob's spiritual and physical world and to understand how the older man moved from trauma to recovery. In a next step he transfers the knowledge he gains through witnessing Jakob's healing process to his own world and tries to apply the new insights to his particular situation. Through reading Jakob's poems and memoirs and taking their message to his heart, Ben slowly re-interprets his life narrative and establishes a more satisfying meaning in it<sup>155</sup>. Bölling also confirms: "Die umfassende Auseinandersetzung mit der Lebensgeschichte und dem schriftlichen Werk Jakob Beers vermittelt Ben wiederholt wichtige Impulse und initiiert somit eine Weiterentwicklung seiner Persönlichkeit" (182).

Because of Ben's dependency on Jakob's texts, critics<sup>156</sup> often refer to Jakob as Ben's (spiritual) father or mentor. The biblical Jakob had indeed a son called Benjamin and a further co-relation to Jewish ancestry is that Ben retrieves Jakob's notebooks and thus ensures that his message is passed on to others; first and foremost to Ben himself who "becomes the spiritual or adoptive heir to Jakob's own experience" (Zeitlin 189).

Having read Jakob's texts, Ben re-evaluates his relationship to his parents and gradually starts to re-interpret their identities, their behaviour and their relationship toward him (Bölling 182). He realizes that he did not understand them, reacted with anger to their apparently weird habits and misjudged their overprotectiveness and hyper-sensibility to ordinariness. He did not see that those aspects were the results of their experiences during the war and that they actually found some way to move past their trauma. Jakob's narrative helps him to re-interpret their relationship (Parry 363) and to understand his parents, to finally arrive at a more or less appropriate and meaningful interpretation of their life narrative (Bölling 185).

Through Jakob's message "My son, my daughter: May you never be deaf to love" (Michaels, FP 195) Ben realizes "die heilbringende Kraft der Liebe" (Bölling 185), which his parents felt towards each other, which made them go on with their life and

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<sup>155</sup> See also Rosen: "Ben is healed by the poetry of Jakob, healed in the sense that his own poetic sensibility is released, along with language for his family's pain-filled experience".

<sup>156</sup> For example see Krote (521), Gubar (*Empathic Identification* 265-266) and Whitehead (*Trauma Fiction* 54).

even let them have a third child (Krote 521). He also becomes aware of what lies beyond his parents' devotion to ordinary things and he starts to appreciate his mother's attitude and perception of the world and says "I learned that her gratitude was not the least inordinate. I know now this was her gift to me" (Michaels, *FP* 223).

Secondly, he realizes that love has the power to redeem (Krote 530):

Once, I saw my father sitting in the snow-blue kitchen. I was six years old. [...] My father was sitting at the table, eating. I was transfixed by his face. This was the first time I had seen food make my father cry. But now, from thousands of feet in the air, I see something else. My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other. I see that I must give what I most need. (Michaels, *FP* 294)

Through Jakob's memoirs in which he describes the happiness he found with Michaela, Ben realizes "that his fate too will depend on 'love's work'" (Parry 363). He knows that he needs love to come to terms with his past and to create new prospects for his future. He returns, not yet healed, but with a lesson learnt that may enable him to come to terms with his past and open a future with his wife (Howells 114). "He finally begins to think of a series of concentric circles telling a story he only understands at second sight. In the end, he sees the possibility for rebirth, something his father had, not through him but through his mother" (Estrin 294) and he realizes that he could also get this support through Naomi; that she actually tried to give it to him (Estrin 294), but failed, because he did not accept it.

### ***Ben's search for an empathic listener***

Ben thus has to re-learn the healing potential of empathy, companionship and bearing witness from Jakob and it is also just through his help that he realizes that Naomi does not only offer him love and understanding, but is also a person who knows exactly how to listen. She has a natural ability to understand people without passing judgment onto them or trespassing on their privacy. Ben says about her: "Naomi could listen closely and then with painful exactitude come out with a statement that sliced to the heart of things" (Michaels, *FP* 234).

However, as stated above, Ben has to run into the wrong direction first, before he realizes that he needs Naomi's empathy to be healed. He begins an affair with Petra,

who, similar to Alex, “represents the erasure or betrayal of memory” (Criglington 98). She distances Ben from his real self and his quest for his past. Of course, he tries to find in Petra the woman who could heal him (Michaels, *FP* 277) and for this purpose tells her all about Jakob and tries to use Jakob’s poems to describe Petra (Michaels, *FP* 274, 276), but he more hopes than believes that he has found the woman, the muse that will help him to overcome his trauma. Their understanding is only on a sexual basis and his attempts to free himself from his own and his parents’ trauma by “[shaking] *myself free of a million lives, an unborn for every ghost*, over Petra’s firm belly” (Michaels, *FP* 278) therefore fail: “Having emptied myself completely, I slept as though too full to move” (Michaels, *FP* 278). The trauma is still there inside him, because he still lacks a listener who understands and is willing to take on his trauma.

Ben needs Naomi, the woman who shares her memories with him (Michaels, *FP* 285), as does Michaela with Jakob (King 147) and he starts to regret that he “saw my wife’s beauty and didn’t embrace her” (Michaels, *FP* 278) and that “I wasted love, I wasted it” (Michaels, *FP* 286). He ignored what kept his parents alive and realizes that the love and understanding Jakob was searching for all those years and then found in Michaela was offered to him all along, but he was not able to see it.

Having realized this, and his dependency on Naomi, he starts to imagine his return (Michaels, *FP* 293). “I will stop myself from confessing I was on Idhra with a woman [...] Naomi, I remember a story you told me” and he will take these shared memories as a basis to form new promises and create new chapters for their life narrative; thus emphasizing a continual line from their past to the present and future. As Jakob recovered through Michaela’s empathy, Ben finally sees the possibility to be healed by Naomi’s love, if he can “give what [he] most [needs]” (Michaels, *FP* 294). He returns to Canada, ready to confront his past and with the hope to save his marriage through reformulating their life narrative.

## 6.2 THE WINTER VAULT

### 6.2.1 Marina

Marina tries to claim and narrate her trauma by drawing illustrations for children's books. Her pictures are realistic, for some observers like Avery they are even "too real" (Michaels, *TWV* 155). No witches or monsters haunt her forests, but the horrors are all to be found in the real world:

History soaked the ground of Marina's story-forests. [...] without resources and with the handicap of one's innocence, a child met the terrors of the dense, dark, unhappy wood, the winding paths from which one must not stray yet lead to the inevitable terror. [...] Peering closely into the darkness of her paint, almost invisible, one saw half-faces, crippled hands, mad eyes, desires exerting their will on the events of the story. (Michaels, *TWV* 88)

The illustrations unconsciously evoke fear and danger and thus hint at the traumatization of their creator; Marina even claims that the inspiration for them comes "[f]rom home" (Michaels, *TWV* 88). At the same time, they give her the possibility to express herself, transform her trauma and keep it from intruding. She therefore can lead a happy and peaceful life and be a loving and caring mother to her son.

During his childhood, it is however hard for Avery to "put the two parts of her together [his mother's dark pictures and her gay character]. Only later when [he] began to learn the history did [he] truly understand this was not her nightmare alone, but the world's..." (Michaels, *TWV* 155). He realizes that his mother's trauma is incorporated in her pictures and that they are the result of the traumatic loss that shattered her life narrative, but he also becomes aware of their healing potential.

These pictures are also Marina's way to defy the Nazis' ideologies that led to the destruction of her home and family. As there were racial laws, there were "landscape rules" (Michaels, *TWV* 93) prescribing which flowers were allowed to grow and which were not. To prove the Nazis' failure to erase the Jewish race (Michaels, *TWV* 91), one can find the banned "tiny forest flower *Impatiens parviflora* [...] hidden somewhere in every one of [her] paintings" (Michaels, *TWV* 93).

Marina thus comes to terms with her trauma. She can claim and transform it into something meaningful, consequently integrate it into her life narrative and thus has an

optimistic, life-affirming attitude. She even wants to hand down her experiences and thus comfort others: “After the war, I painted for children who saw nothing but terror in whatever I painted, no matter how innocent the scene. [...] Now I paint for children who have not known this; I try to paint beautiful things, to arm them with images in case they’ll need them” (Michaels, *TWV* 163). She is also sensitive to Jean’s and Avery’s troubles and sufferings and thus can offer them understanding and advice for their recovery from trauma.

### 6.2.2 Avery and Jean

#### *Finding a partner, finding an empathic listener*

When Avery and Jean meet, both deal with the losses of beloved family members. Sundborg actually calls them “two lonely souls reaching out to one another” (67), because both long for a partner whom they could narrate their grief and who would listen without judgment, but with understanding and love. Such an empathic listener could fill the holes left behind by their dead parents, and as their relationship becomes more intimate they find indeed peace and healing in each other’s company: “For Avery it had always been three, until his father died. For Jean it had been two, longing for the third. Now they [Marina, Avery, Jean] were three, and each felt the rightness of it” (Michaels, *TWV* 87).

From the very beginning, their coping with trauma is based on the formulation and sharing of their life narratives. They both wish to listen to the other and thus help her/him to interpret the narrative. They can carry the other’s burden and show empathy and they are both sensitive enough to feel when one may encourage the other to share her/his narrative and when one should rather wait until s/he starts on her/his own accord (Michaels, *TWV* 64). Narrating and telling stories to each other is also the basis of their relationship. They exchange their knowledge, memories, beliefs, wishes and dreams as gifts and thus develop a strong intimate bond and a detailed knowledge of each other (e.g., Michaels, *TWV* 70-75)<sup>157</sup>, which enables them to start a shared life narrative. At

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<sup>157</sup> See also Haun (169), who sees this exchanging of their life narratives also as a reaction and counteraction to the destruction and alteration of the Canadian and Egyptian landscapes they witness. He



some point Avery reflects on their relationship and comes to the following conclusion: “at what moment during their years together had this woman, this Jean Shaw, become Jean Escher? He knew it had nothing to do with marriage, not even with sex, but somehow had to do with all this talking, this talking they achieved together” (Michaels, *TWV* 158).

Apart from this narrating and listening to each other’s narratives, both of them use other art forms to deal with their traumas. Together they roam the Canadian landscape and while Avery draws the scenes that affect him, Jean notes down the plants that catch her eyes (Michaels, *TWV* 80-81). In the end, however, they once again share their private artistic visions by “[describing] to each other what they, with their different eyes, had seen” (Michaels, *TWV* 81).

Then there is the body painting: Avery paints on Jean’s back perceiving her body as a sculpture he can modulate in such a way that it becomes a place where he can store his whole life by “paint[ing], beginning from childhood, until he was again man-grown” (Michaels, *TWV* 6). Jean, on the other hand, is his ‘listener’ who does not see the picture, but by ‘reading’ the strokes of the brush is “free to imagine any scene she wished” (Michaels, *TWV* 6). This ritual is very intimate and carries sexual implication as is seen in the language (e.g.: “He chose a colour and let it seep into the soft hair of the brush, infused with river water. Gently he released its fullness across Jean’s strong back” (Michaels, *TWV* 6)), but it is also an important ritual of bonding, once again an exchange and witnessing of narratives, since “each gave to the other a secret landscape” (Michaels, *TWV* 6).

### *Loss of child, loss of narrative*

With this understanding and love for each other “they [are] on the edge of lifelong happiness and, therefore, inescapable sorrow” (Michaels, *TWV* 8) and through the loss of their child the latter is the case. Their relationship, although built on the narrating and sharing of their memories is not strong enough to overcome this trauma. They no longer feel that the other one is an appropriate empathic listener, because they both experience

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claims that within this context they feel an urge to entrust each other with their stories and memories to ensure that they are not lost like the things around them.

the same loss and both have no way to deal with it or any words to translate it into a narrative. As a result, they separate to find a new witness who could help them formulate their trauma.

As indicated above<sup>158</sup>, one also needs not only a witness, but the companionship of a loving person<sup>159</sup>, but the closest connection and intimacy Avery and Jean can uphold is that “the phone would ring and she [Jean] would lie with Avery’s voice pressed against her ear” (Michaels, *TWV* 225). They still want to come to terms with their trauma and resume a life together, because they love each other. Their grief is simply too big and they just do not know how to start, how to find a language that can carry their trauma: “She could not define the content of these conversations. She knew they were a kind of code he meant her to understand, but all she heard was a heart-clenching formality, a courtesy, yet not this exactly; the painful decorum that rises out of the ruins of intimacy, just as intimate” (Michaels, *TWV* 273-274). However, this lasting wish to come together again will be of importance once they have found a new empathic listener that helps them to claim their traumatic experience.

### 6.2.3 Avery

After their separation in their quest for healing Avery and Jean return to their individual methods<sup>160</sup> to deal with traumatic experiences and memories which they developed in the time before they knew each other. However, they have to re-adjust or change them to fit their new needs.

To cope with his father’s death Avery used his profession and knowledge about engines and machines to refer to him and put the trauma into words. After the loss of his daughter, he does no longer find comfort and consolation in his work. It was helpful as long as his father was the only person he had to mourn and commemorate, but now he has to look for other, different ways that can translate and transform this new trauma. He now feels that “[t]he engineering is essential ... But [he wants] so much to pick up a

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<sup>158</sup> Compare it also to Jakob and Ben’s cases.

<sup>159</sup> Avery’s father also stated that “[t]here is only one question that matters. In whose embrace do you wish to be when you die” (Michaels, *TWV* 276).

<sup>160</sup> Those methods, namely planting and architecture, are also mentioned by Haun (169).

brush” (Michaels, *TWV* 157) and therefore switches from engineering to architecture. First, he finds an escape in architecture, but gradually he also uses it as means to claim and come to terms with his trauma. He thus adopts a more artistic and maybe more suitable form of narrating, which goes hand in hand with a change of perspective:

Every building makes space, and great buildings make room for the contemplation of death ... He remembered parting the blanket to look at his daughter entire, and Jean’s face when she woke in the hospital, seeing in him the one thing for which her tongue could find no word ... How careful one must be with a roof – the enclosing principle – the line between a man and the sky ... (Michaels, *TWV* 194-195).

He no longer wants to destroy or change nature and landscapes with his engines and machines, but he tries to create buildings with a purpose and a meaning, where there is room for both happiness and sorrow. In the same way he has to reform and re-interpret his life narrative so that it can incorporate the loss of his daughter.

Additionally, this change of interests from his father’s domain to architecture makes Avery leave him behind. He is still able to value what he taught him and he knows about the positive and fascinating sides of engineering, but he wants to move on, to re-evaluate his life narrative and write his own new chapters.

In contrast to his profession, architecture offers him the dynamics and openness to translate his latest traumatic experiences and enables him to re-interpret and thus to claim and transform them into something meaningful. Architecture as a metaphor also helps him to understand what happened to him and Jean and he gains the insight that healing from trauma takes its time; that one must be very careful in whatever one tries to put into words and that one has to integrate it with even more caution into one’s life narrative:

He was beginning to realize what it meant to build structures of the humblest and most straightforward disclosure, frank and spare, without irony; capable simply of both sorrow and solace: a house that understands that the entire course of life can be altered, for better or for worse, by someone walking across a room. (Michaels, *TWV* 207)

His mother, who realizes his attempt to come to terms with his trauma, encourages him and in order to help she entrusts him with “a little project” (Michaels, *TWV* 301), namely to design a small house. She thus offers him to use his newly acquired knowledge and

produce a well-planned work of architecture. She hopes that in the process he will also learn how to order and claim his trauma and re-build his life narrative and identity.

#### **6.2.4 Jean and Lucjan**

##### *Jean's way of narrating*

Jean also has her means and methods to come to terms with her traumas. Her life narrative and the attempt to claim and transform the traumatic loss of her mother were always linked to gardening. Whenever Jean was about to lose or witnessed others losing something, she collected seeds of the plants growing on that spot (e.g., Michaels, *TWV* 50). She sees memories as bound to place and the plants which grow in that ground as the bearers of these memories. When she thus collects seeds, she also preserves the memories with them.

She actually shared her love and fascination for flowers and plants with her mother and since her death Jean's main occupation has been to nurse her mother's garden. Sometimes it even appears to be some kind of duty to keep it flourishing and beautiful. Therefore, Jean does not only pack her belongings when she moves from one place to another, but also takes cuts and seeds from every plant in the garden; even when she has to store it "in pots and jars on [her] living room floor" (Michaels, *TWV* 61). It is quite obvious that the garden is a transitional object for Jean with which she refers to her dead mother. In its bloom and growth her mother is still present and tending the garden is for Jean some kind of interaction and conversation with her. As she phrases it: "[p]lanting became a vocation. Suddenly I felt I could keep on loving her, that I could keep telling her things this way" (Michaels, *TWV* 59). This vocation develops into a passion and Jean starts to use botany to relate to other things and make sense of what she encounters – much like Jakob uses geology, Ben meteorology or Avery engineering.

After the stillbirth of her child Jean turns again to her gardening for consolation: "She wanted nothing more than to dig, to blacken her hands. She asked herself what it meant, this desire; it was not to lay claim, she was sure. Perhaps a way to offer herself, as one stands before another, asking to understand" (Michaels, *TWV* 188). She tries to express herself and her loss and to claim the traumatic experiences, but she "did not understand

what her botany meant to her now, nor what to do with it” (Michaels, *TWV* 193). Jean fails to use gardening as a form of narrative and translation of trauma; she cannot transform the loss of her daughter, nor integrate it into her life narrative, i.e., her garden. Nor can the garden serve as a transitional object for her daughter. However, at the same time she feels an urge to express her trauma and desperately tries to deal with it in the only way she knows.

Believing to feel a new vocation, a new purpose, Jean starts to plant obsessively everywhere around the city to mark places which she thinks to be filled with meaning and memories of the people she saw there (Michaels, *TWV* 195-196). She explains her reasons in the following way:

When I’m planting, said Jean, I’m leaving a kind of signal. And I’m hoping that the person it’s meant for will receive it. If someone walking down the street experiences the scent of a flower they haven’t smelled for thirty years – even if they don’t recognize the scent but are suddenly reminded of something that gives them pleasure – then maybe I’ve done something worthwhile. (Michaels, *TWV* 202)

On a symbolic level, she thus tries to give those places life and meaning in the form of growing plants; something she could not offer to her child or now cannot find in her life narrative. This shows us that Jean is actually not able to face her own trauma, but rather takes care of others’. Therefore it does not “[give] her pleasure. But after a night of planting, she was stunned with loneliness, as if she’d been tending graves” (Michaels, *TWV* 196). In addition, Jean does not consider that “what [she evokes] could be something painful [...]. When you plant something in people’s memories, you never know what you’ll pull up” (Michaels, *TWV* 202)<sup>161</sup>.

On the one hand, however, she thus can avoid her trauma, can recover a bit from her suffering, as the following quote shows: “the meditation of lifting the earth one scoopful at a time, submerged in thought, for hours moving toward an understanding [...]. She would sink her mind into an image [...] or something Avery had said” (Michaels, *TWV* 197). On the other hand, planting as a way of remembrance and mourning fails to heal her. It takes some time until Jean realizes that flowers are not only markers but also need

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<sup>161</sup> From this utterance one already sees her inexperience in mourning and narrating trauma in contrast to Lucjan, who knows about the nature of trauma and traumatic memory.

to be given meaning and that the person who leaves them must interpret or re-interpret their significance. Only when they can tell a meaningful story, their message can be passed on to others.

### ***Learning through reading and witnessing***

Jean starts recovering from her trauma through reading and listening to Lucjan's narrative about his life, which then enables her to resume her own life narrative. She meets him while both try to deal with their traumatic past. Although it is rather a coincidence, "it's meant to be" (Michaels, *TWV* 199) for the simple reason that Lucjan "was just wishing I had someone to witness it [his painting] when I saw your little light hopping up and down in the grass like a bird. This guarantees our solidarity" (Michaels, *TWV* 199).

From this moment onwards their narrating and witnessing of each other's narratives begins, although they play quite different roles within this strange relationship. They are not equals, but rather act as teacher and pupil. Neither are they lovers (sexual intercourse has a different meaning in their relationship) or soul mates like Jakob and Michaela, Ben's parents or Ben and Naomi, but merely 'witnesses'. Empathy and companionship thus play a minor part, because almost from the beginning it is clear that the main purpose of sharing their life narratives and memories is to help Jean to face and translate her trauma. Lucjan has little hope and belief in a healing relationship for himself.

At the beginning they do not yet tell their narratives and memories but indulge in other artistic activities, which however display their characters and which are already linked to the activity of reading and witnessing the other one's narrative. Jean is repeatedly drawn by Lucjan and thus "made visible by the sight of another" (Michaels, *TWV* 209), but his "glance was painful" (Michaels, *TWV* 209) for her. This activity also shows how those two are positioned: Jean stands in the centre of attention and Lucjan is the gazing and admiring artist, the person who studies and investigates her and who tries to mend this damaged sculpture. As time progresses, they grow closer together and Lucjan's drawings become "[a] record of his changing knowledge of her" (Michaels, *TWV* 220).

They also start to tell their narratives and gradually become each other's witnesses who "learn the values of each other's words, what they cost" (Michaels, *TWV* 211). Like in a

therapy session, the narrating of their stories happens according to strict guidelines. Lucjan explains the purpose of telling one's memories and instructs Jean to listen carefully without judgment and to accept and treasure what she is going to hear. In short, he prepares her to become a witness to his life narrative:

I can only speak if you are lying next to me [...], because what I am going to say is my entire life. And I have nothing really but these memories. I need you to listen as if these memories are your own. [...] I need you to hear everything I say, and everything I can't say must be heard too. It is terrifying to listen this way, leaving everything behind. Maybe I ask something impossible... (Michaels, *TWV* 211-212)

The way he prepares her makes it obvious that she is going to hear a narrative about haunting and still painful traumatic experiences and memories: "I haven't talked about these things for a long time, he said" (Michaels, *TWV* 235). It will be a narrative that is full of fragments and emotions and that narrates things without translating them clearly into words. Furthermore, Lucjan does not tell his story chronologically. He starts in the middle and jumps between accounts about pre-war Warsaw, the Warsaw Uprising, his life in the ghetto, his experiences while rebuilding the city and the description of the living conditions under the communist regime and leaves the most traumatizing event, namely his mother's sudden disappearance, to the very end. And yet, in contrast to Jakob, he does not seem to have difficulties in transforming his traumas into language or in formulating his narrative. He narrates and interprets them; commenting and reflecting on their meaning.

Lucjan's numerous experiences during the war apparently have turned him into a skilled narrator and listener to trauma narratives and he knows about the healing potential reading a narrative may offer. He recounts his life narrative for one precise purpose, namely to make Jean read it, reflect on it and thus to enable her to claim and transform her own trauma, but he has no hope that her witnessing of his narrative will bring him healing as well. In contrast to Jakob or Ben, he does not believe in the healing potential of an empathic relationship and thus he does not look for a partner to share his trauma or empathize with him, because he is actually convinced that Jean, like so many others, will not understand him. Therefore, he opens up to her, but simultaneously also refuses her attempts to help him. He just wants to have a witness, a reader who acknowledges his

narrative and is willing to learn something from it, who will gain a catharsis. Certainly, they start an affair, but only because

Jean knew Lucjan would never have spoken of himself without the vulnerability of skin between them [...] that vulnerability held them hostage to the deeper pact of words. Lucjan felt in her an acute listening and this above all, Jean decided, was his desire. [...] She began to understand that this kind of intimacy was, in its own way, a renaming. [...] The secret renaming of the body by another. (Michaels, *TWV* 272-273).

The need for Jean's surrender shows that it is clearly hard for Lucjan to share his narrative and that he entrusts her with his story only when she is willing to give him something of her own. Nevertheless, his life narrative has an effect on her. It helps her to come to an understanding of herself and the world around her, which will later enable her to face and claim her own trauma.

Observing her change and progress, Lucjan more and more encourages Jean to share her narrative as well. He is most curious about her life and relationship with Avery (Michaels, *TWV* 233); not out of jealousy, but he rather wants to know these parts of her narrative to assist her in re-arranging and re-interpreting them. Lucjan wishes and knows how to help her and how to reconcile her with her husband: "I want you to talk about him, whispered Lucjan, because it makes our lying here together more real, because you are here with me partly because you love him. And to know you I must know him. Please, keep on" (Michaels, *TWV* 234). He senses that deep down Jean loves Avery, that they share an intimacy he will never have and that this love will finally enable her to overcome her trauma.

Jean sometimes actually feels "a sudden, burning homesickness. What they [Avery and she] knew together: black earth and stone trees, swathing forests, a glimpse of stars. [...] No use to ask Avery if he remembered. She knew he remembered" (Michaels, *TWV* 269). In contrast to Lucjan, who is unpredictable and utterly different from her, she knows Avery's memories and thoughts (as do Jakob and Michaela, Ben and Naomi) and she feels that he is the listener and partner she needs. It is only at the moment that they are too estranged and hurt to resume their former relationship. Beside Lucjan she feels like a stranger (as does Jakob beside Alex), and yet she needs this strangeness to find the courage to face her trauma and begin a narrative about it.



In time and with Lucjan's help, Jean's plants and flowers again serve as some kind of language to translate her trauma and they continue to play a crucial role in her healing process. Lucjan underlines the use of flowers as means for mourning, the first step of claiming the trauma, because

[p]eople have an instinct to leave flowers in a place where something terrible has happened. [...] It's a desperate instinct to leave a mark of innocence on a violent wound [...]. You need flowers for a place of violent death. Flowers were the very first thing we needed. Before bread. And long before words. (Michaels, *TWV* 217-218)

An advice Jean will take in the end and which will also help her to overcome her trauma. However, he also uses flowers to show how life can even spring from nothing or grow in ruins: "Often the entranceways to these *meliny*, these burrows, these tunnels into the rubble, were marked with a pot of flowers. Geraniums. A blurt of red, a spurt of blood among the bones" (Michaels, *TWV* 214-215). In this way he tries to tell her that she should live and grow like her flowers despite suffering, sadness, harshness, etc. Lucjan also emphasizes how important one's origin, experiences and characteristics are. He knows that one's promises and character determine who we are.

In time Jean re-interprets the flower-motif of her own accord: She learns that flowers are not only means for mourning and grieving, trenched with sadness and longing, but also living things, growing from seeds that contain the whole past of the flower, they can bloom and give comfort to the observer, but most importantly, they carry the hope for the future – no matter how long it takes for them to root in fertile earth again. The knowledge that seeds can survive even under extreme conditions (see Michaels, *TWV* 140) is a background to all of Jean's suffering, which constantly reminds us that in every death there is life. After the loss of her daughter, Jean does not bloom or grow, but we know that she is not dead altogether; she just has to find fertile ground again where she can spread her roots and look towards a future. Similarly, she has to acknowledge her past and her trauma and unite the broken pieces of her life, her narrative and her self.

Another of Lucjan's important lessons concerns the way of mourning. He knows that no replacement or replica will bring back what has been lost and with regard to the

commemoration of the massacre at Katyn<sup>162</sup> (Michaels, *TWV* 219), he experienced that memory can be altered and is thus unreliable. However, he also underlines that the transformation of memories and the creation of “memory sites” can be a means of consolation and healing. He explains this conviction using the exact reconstruction of Warsaw’s old town as an example. The replica fulfilled an important purpose and “even those who disagreed understood the necessity” (Michaels, *TWV* 228):

Walking for the first time into the replica of the Old town, said Lucjan, the rebuilt market square – it was humiliating. Your delirium made you ashamed – you knew it was a trick, a brainwashing, and yet you wanted it so badly. [...] [But gradually] you began to remember more and more. Childhood memories, memories of youth and love [...] and who was this all for if not for the ghosts? (Michaels, *TWV* 309)

The people were aware that it was merely a replica, but it offered them the possibility to give the dead a place to rest. Therefore, “Janina, my point is this. Who is to say that the rebuilt city was worth less or more than the original? Is desire the only determination of value? I don’t know” (Michaels, *TWV* 231). For Jean, who hears these stories it is “false consolation” (Michaels, *TWV* 233) and she thus echoes Pierre Nora’s<sup>163</sup> (13) treatise about true and false memory<sup>164</sup>. According to her nothing can replace or substitute what has been lost, even Abu Simbel, which has been moved stone by stone, will be a mere copy of the temple it has been (Michaels, *TWV* 139). Lucjan however responds that actually “everything exists because of loss” (Michaels, *TWV* 233) and “[e]verything we do is false consolation [...]. Or to put it another way, any consolation is true” (Michaels,

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<sup>162</sup> This passage reads as follows: “Suppose you wish me to forget the significance of a certain name ... [...] the Soviets erect a national war monument to mark the place where the village of Khatyn had been razed by the Germans. [...] Simply because there is a certain other clearing, in a forest near Smolensk, a place called Katyn” (Michaels, *TWV* 219). This was the only “way to make us ‘forget’ Katyn [...]. The events are confused until there is only one event made true by the irrefutable evidence of one gigantic statue” (Michaels, *TWV* 219).

<sup>163</sup> Pierre Nora (for a discussion of his theory see also Whitehead (*Memory* 142-143)), who developed the theory of the “*lieux de mémoire*”, argues that true memory, which is preserved and commemorated “in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories” (13), has been lost and replaced by archive, verbal memory. People nowadays rather collect memories and enshrine them in these “memory sites” (LaCapra’s translation of Nora’s “*lieux de mémoire*” in *History and Memory* 10) and thus try to stop time, to keep the past close, to save the memory from being forgotten (Nora 19) or to undo the trauma. However, these “*lieux de mémoire* have no referent in reality” (Nora 23), they refer entirely to themselves and to the version of the past they commemorate. As J. Young (181-182) argues, they transform the trauma they commemorate depending on the shared cultural, social and historical narrative the community wants to narrate and remember. They can be constructed and re-constructed and these narratives are therefore already interpreted if not even idealized and no longer faithful to the actual historical event (J. Young 178).

<sup>164</sup> See also King (29).

TWV 235). What makes life worth living is not that every part is represented faithfully to reality in one's life narrative, but that it is meaningful. One therefore has to interpret the destruction of Warsaw, of the villages along the Nile and Saint Lawrence River or the death of Jean and Avery's daughter as meaningful and in a way that allows one to lay the trauma to rest and move on.

### *Lucjan's refusal of empathy*

Lucjan thus clearly helps Jean to claim her trauma and start re-formulating her life narrative and re-gaining a meaningful identity. However, when Jean tries to help him with her empathy in turn, Lucjan blocks each one of her attempts:

Jean reached over and put her hand on his. He lifted her hand and put it down gently on the bed between them. – You wanted me to tell this, he said. He was right to reproach her; she should not have reached out her hand. What could her touch mean against such facts; nothing. Someone else's touch perhaps, but not hers. (Michaels, TWV 300-301)<sup>165</sup>

This situation is completely different to the relationship between Jakob and Michaela. When Michaela bears witness to his narrative and clearly shows her empathy, Jakob experiences understanding and acknowledgement and thus can come to terms with his trauma. Lucjan, however, refuses Jean's empathy, because "I don't want your pity. Not your psychoanalysis. Not even empathy. I want simple, common, fellow feeling. Something real" (Michaels, TWV 310-311).

### *The traumatized community*

One reason for Lucjan's rejection of her empathy is that he believes to be misunderstood; he feels that he and his narrative will never be witnessed as it should be and thus he also refuses to accept pity or compassion, which is false witnessing in his eyes: "Talk is only a reprieve, Lucjan had said this more than once. No matter how loud we shout, no matter how personal our revelations, history does not hear us" (Michaels, TWV 312). Jean thus cannot offer him healing through her bearing witness to his narrative.

Nevertheless, Lucjan is not simply numbed and stagnated by his trauma. Long before he met Jean he found help, understanding and a form of companionship within the circle of

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<sup>165</sup> See also Michaels (TWV 315).

his friends and fellow sufferers; a circumstance that is denied to both Jakob and Ben, who stand totally alone with their trauma. Lucjan and his friends all share some traumatic experiences stemming from the war and the communist regime and all were driven from their hometown Warsaw. They thus form a traumatized community with a collective narrative into which they have integrated some of their personal experiences and memories.

On the one hand, this narrative is not enough to heal them entirely, because some parts of their individual traumatic memories are still unarticulated; they still remain as haunting untold stories in their unconsciousness. To some of its members the collective narrative is even oppressing, because

the most important, the most meaningful, the most intimate moment of your life was also the most important, the most intimate moment for hundreds of thousands of others? [...] People pretend that's a brotherhood. But what belongs to you? Nothing. Not even the most important moment of your life is your own. (Michaels, *TWV* 263-264)

One has to swim with the larger fish, trying as best as one can to come to terms with one's traumatic experiences. In this particular case, the person experiences an existential vacuum, because he sees neither meaning nor hope for the future (Michaels, *TWV* 266). On the other hand, their narrative is meaningful enough and if one accepts it and takes it as one's own, it offers comfort and understanding. A fact that is also observed by Jean: "Jean saw what bound Lucjan to her, and what bound him – with the friendship and loyalty of decades – to those closest to him" (Michaels, *TWV* 322).

However, as in every traumatized community, the final step, the telling of the narrative to others, has not yet been accomplished. Convinced that nobody who has not experienced the same things can understand what they mean to the members, they keep their position as outsiders and guard their memories like a secret. They thus cannot move past their trauma, but by ensuring each other's understanding, acceptance and companionship, they are as happy in their isolation as they can be.

### *Forms of collective narrating*

Within this group there are various forms of narrating. The members of a jazz orchestra called the "Stray Dogs" share their loneliness, the longing for what is forever gone and

everything, e.g., their songs or the names of the clubs in which they play, is a commemoration of their destroyed homes or the fallen heroes during the Warsaw Uprising. The pain of all their losses is reflected in their music:

The Stray Dogs took each song apart, dismantling the melody, painstakingly, painfully, sappers dismantling a lie, and then turned each single component around so many times it disintegrated. Then they put it together again from nothing, notes and fragments of notes, bent notes and breaths, squawks on the horns and the reeds' empty-lidded beating of keys. By the time the melody reappeared, one was sick with longing for it. (Michaels, *TWV* 254)

What they play and how they play it is a narrative in itself, a narrative about the sadness which only sounds beautiful and meaningful to those who understand it.

Lucjan uses painting and sculpturing as a form of narrative, although it is less a means to come to terms with his traumas. He always paints the same, namely the animals of Lascaux, and uses what is already there and integrates it into his picture: e.g., the structure of a fence “was integrated into the textures and forms of fur, hooves, eyes, horns. In this way not only the animals of Lascaux, but the decrepit fence itself leaped into life” (Michaels, *TWV* 199). He turns the ordinary things into art without altering them, because in his opinion, everything is important. This proves that Lucjan is capable of seeing things, claiming them and putting them into ‘words’, but this does not help him to overcome his trauma. He sticks to the same motif and takes no effort to claim his trauma further and this is a sign of his stagnation.

Another group within this traumatized community are the actors in Ewa’s theatre company who

had worked together for a long time, a bodily history among them. [...] the instantly complex communication between these bodies, the moment continually changing, deepening into humour or sorrow. And sometimes his pathos was intense, and a hole opened, and everyone watching from the edges of the room found their own sorrow pouring into it. (Michaels, *TWV* 263)

The plays, like the music, are ways of narrating their traumas, but this takes place in a small enclosed circle where everyone shares the same pain and grief.

Jean is aware of the shared memories and traditions and the intimacy among the community’s members and “felt a scarecrow” (Michaels, *TWV* 260) among them. She sees that in the safety of this group Lucjan allows himself to experience some comfort,

while he refuses any offer of help or empathy from outsiders. Lucjan is thus stagnated in his recovery process, as are his friends, but within his traumatized community his life narrative is meaningful and acknowledged by the other members. Ewa explains this to Jean:

We're – *uwiklani* – entangled; Paweł, Lucjan, and me. So many times we've saved each other over the years; perhaps it's as simple as that. [...] Sometimes Paweł goes to sit with him, but it's me he needs. It's my hands he needs. I stay with him until he falls asleep ... Do I have to have a name for it? It's not a love affair, not a romance we're having, not something psychological, not an arrangement – It's more like ... a disaster at sea. – You're a family, said Jean. [...] We've lived many lifetimes together. [...] Of all of us, Lucjan feels everything the worst. Sometimes he can't bear his loneliness; soul-loneliness. I think you understand, said Ewa. She spoke with such contrition, Jean could hardly hear her: We teach each other how to live. (Michaels, *TWV* 323-324)

The members of the community give each other what they need. They witness each other's narratives and accept them without any further explanations. They also assure each other of understanding and companionship, and thus stabilized by their collective narrative, they may even help others.

Lucjan, who saw Jean's traumatization and saw that she was suffering from similar feelings of loneliness and grief, allowed her to enter the community as a witness and reader of their narrative. He knows that through her traumatic losses Jean is able to share their group identity, to pass the horizon between her world and the world described by Lucjan and imagine how it must have been like for Lucjan to live in the destroyed Warsaw<sup>166</sup>. However, his purpose was to offer her some of the comfort he himself experiences in their midst and to make her strong enough to face her own trauma so that she can leave the group again.

Jean gradually realizes that she is not meant to be a member of this traumatized community. She has no place in Lucjan's world, but she feels that she has been entrusted with some important knowledge and that she should transfer what she has learnt among them to her own situation and try to claim her trauma and then re-establish the comforting and intimate relationship with Avery.

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<sup>166</sup> She even goes a step further and, looking at pictures of the destroyed Polish capital "[feels] Lucjan, and what it was to stand in that place" (Michaels, *TWV* 247).

### *Jean's search for healing*

Encouraged by the experiences among the members of the traumatized community, Jean is finally able to tell Lucjan about the loss of her child and he understands and offers her the interpretation she needs:

Her fear of not carrying, her fear of carrying, another child. Her body abandoning Avery's touch. – Janina, said Lucjan, fearlessness is a kind of despair, do not wish it, it is the opposite of courage... [...] The absence that had been so deep, since childhood – at last Jean felt it for what it was, for what it had always been – a presence. Death is the reach of love, and all this time she had not recognized what had been her mother's task in her, nor her child's; for love always has a task. (Michaels, *TWV* 319)<sup>167</sup>

Through entering the world of his narrative and through bearing witness to his traumatic experiences, she has realized her own trauma and learnt that loss is a part of life. It is traumatic, but one has to claim and accept it and learn to deal with it. As the rebuilt towns and temples are only replica, one will never regain what has been lost, but by giving it a place to be mourned and by integrating it as a meaningful component in one's life narrative, one can let it go and move on. One commemorates the dead by laying them to rest and not by keeping them in this world as ghosts or blaming herself for their death. She now knows that mourning a person's death and laying them to rest is a sign of love and thus a way to honour the deceased (Michaels, *TWV* 248). Additionally, any flower that is left behind on such a place of mourning and remembrance are also a sign for commemoration and grieving and simultaneously for life.

When Jean has claimed and transformed her trauma into something meaningful and laid her fear and sadness to rest, Lucjan sends her away, sends her to the person with whose help and empathy she can finally integrate the trauma into her life narrative and reformulate her identity. It is a painful parting and Jean feels another "deepening loss soaked into her" (Michaels, *TWV* 320), but she knows that her place and possibility for a total recovery are to be found in someone else's arms, namely Avery's.

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<sup>167</sup> This appeal reminds us a bit of Athos's lesson to Jakob that he should make love necessary.

### 6.2.5 Avery and Jean

In the end, after they have claimed the traumatic loss of their daughter in their individual ways and with the help of others, both Avery and Jean are finally able to return to each other and resume their shared narrative.

On the day of their daughter's birth, Jean drives to the cemetery and looks upon her daughter's grave for the first time (Michaels, *TWV* 327). She is able to mourn her properly without guilt and finally lay her traumatic memories to rest<sup>168</sup> by planting her flowers as signs for both mourning and love. These flowers are then also the sign for Avery that it is now time to resume their relationship and their shared life narrative

Both find together again, because "only real love waits while we journey through our grief. [...] It is this waiting we must do for each other" (Michaels, *TWV* 93). They realize that their daughter is still present in their love to each other and that their loss should not end their search for meaning and happiness, because "[e]verything that has been made from love is alive" (Michaels, *TWV* 335).

After all that has happened between them, they are now able to overcome the trauma. They have learnt from it, have become stronger and, although changed, they can move on and try to reclaim the once shared intimacy and life narrative and open it for future chapters (Michaels, *TWV* 332). They stand at the beginning of re-establishing their life narrative and of full recovery. They have yet to link the past parts with those they wrote while separated and then create a plan for the future, but they now have the strength to take the effort of re-establishing the continuity.

As a sign for this wish and hope for healing Jean has not only planted flowers, because those "won't last, said Jean. It's too cold. But I planted something else. Seeds from the plants I collected on the riverbank, the day we met" (Michaels, *TWV* 333). By doing so, she has integrated the grave into her garden, i.e., her life narrative, and has given the hope for a new life, for a blooming future to the earth. She thus already started to link hers and Avery's past and the present and opened their life narrative for a future.

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<sup>168</sup> Her aberrated memory has been transformed into an inaugurated one.



They return to their sharing of their thoughts, feelings and narratives as they return to the body painting, but now its form is altered. It is Jean, who takes the position of the “narrator” and paints on Avery’s back, her “listener” and she is aware of the necessary care with which one must deal with narratives or memories: “When Jean was done, she knew how careful she had to be. Not to erase, but to wash away” (Michaels, *TWV* 336).

## **6.3 THE PROCESS AND POSSIBILITY OF HEALING AS PRESENTED IN THE NOVELS**

### **6.3.1 Anne Michaels’s depiction of healing**

It can now be claimed that Michaels’s novels are not only texts about trauma, but first and foremost about healing. This section investigates how she depicts this healing process, which elements her characters need most for its accomplishment and whether the way in which she treats narrative as potential ways of healing corresponds to the use of narratives in psychotherapy.

The prerequisite that makes such a comparison possible is the three-dimensionality of her characters. The focus of her novels clearly lies on their development. They are not merely types, but they are fleshed out to such a degree that the reader takes them as real human beings, empathizes with them and longs as much as they do for their coming to terms with their traumas. Their roundness alongside the credible description of their sufferings and their struggle for healing allows using theories usually applied in psychotherapy when interpreting their attempts to claim trauma.

Michaels’s choice of narrators likewise offers this possibility. *Fugitive Pieces* is told by two first-person narrators and as readers we are thus allowed to enter their minds. Both Ben and Jakob focus and reflect on what is most important for them, namely their traumatic memories and experiences. They constantly circle around them, gradually add more details (e.g., Jakob’s recall of the night his parents died; Ben’s description of the daily life with his parents, where the reader learns about more and more ‘weird’ habits as s/he progresses) and try to order the fragments and give the episodes meaning. We

actually witness their attempts to claim the trauma, to translate it into a language and transform it into a meaningful part of their life narratives and can trace how they come indeed to a better understanding of their trauma in time.

Truly, their narratives are not told chronologically, but are interrupted by their memories or reflections. Neither are they able to fill all the holes with authentic facts, as in the case of Bella's story or the fate of Ben's siblings. However, one should bear in mind that Jakob illustrates his own progress from traumatization to healing (as his self-reflexive comments show<sup>169</sup>) and we as readers accompany him on this last step when he writes down his life narrative. Despite some jumps in time, his memoirs move from his childhood in Poland to his adolescence and adulthood in Canada and Greece. He thus has integrated his trauma into his life narrative, which now has again a meaning for him and a continuity from the past to the present and future.

In comparison, Ben's narrative is more chaotic, and more emotionally loaded. Especially in his first chapter we feel the anger and jealousy the various childhood memories still evoke in him through comments like: "My mother taught me that the extra second it takes to say goodbye – always a kiss – [...] was never misspent. Naomi loved this habit in me, for the plain reason one often finds a lover's habits charming: she didn't understand its origin" (Michaels, *FP* 242). As he progresses to narrate how he found and read Jakob's memoirs and how he was affected by them, his tone however changes. It gets less aggressive and more reflective. He begins to recall different memories or memories whose meaning he misinterpreted earlier. The best example is of course the memory concerning his parents at the dinner table, but he also recalls things Naomi said to him, like: "When we married, Naomi said: Sometimes we need both hands to climb out of a place. Sometimes there are steep places, where one has to walk ahead of the other. If I can't find you, I'll look deeper in myself. If I can't keep up, if you're far ahead, look back. Look back" (Michaels, *FP* 292), which he now understands better and takes as advice to claim his trauma and save their relationship. As readers we thus witness his progress from anger and stagnation over a "therapy session" with Jakob to

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<sup>169</sup> See page 69.

his attempt of re-interpreting his trauma and integrating it as meaningful into his life narrative. His account is thus not entirely non-chronological either.

In *The Winter Vault* Michaels chose to use a third-person narrator but the way she lets her/him narrate still allows the reader to follow the healing progress of the characters almost as well as in Ben's and Jakob's case.

The narrator mainly focuses on Jean, and as readers we learn about the setting, the time and the other characters through her eyes; we also can enter her mind, take over her perspective, read her thoughts, hear what others say to her, and witness her reflections about these things. Avery or Marina are rarely allowed to take over the position of the focalizer and Lucjan's opinions and perspective are actually always mediated through Jean's mind. Her gradual recovery from trauma is therefore the most accessible and convincing one. Much more than we can follow Avery's move towards healing or can only guess about Lucjan's attempts (as we also have to in the cases of Ben's parents or Athos), we witness how she moves from grief and total numbness to a wish to claim her trauma and re-establish her life narrative and a future.

Like *Fugitive Pieces*, the novel is not told chronologically. It sets out with Jean and Avery in Egypt and their courtship and marriage, which is told in retrospect, interrupts the narration about their experiences in Egypt. This part of the novel is also intermingled with several digressions dealing with how other people (e.g. Georgiana Foyle (Michaels, *TWV* 46) or Hassan Dafalla (Michaels, *TWV* 107)) experienced the construction of the Saint Lawrence Seaway or the Aswan Dam. In contrast to *Fugitive Pieces*, one cannot infer any meaning of this temporal structure with regard to the trauma of the individual characters, since they are not the "writers" of the novel, but this interrupted structure has another function. It shows the reader that Jean and Avery's experiences are not unique or isolated: Through the jumps in time and the digressions, their personal loss is linked to those of others (e.g., the loss of home because of the construction of the Saint Lawrence Seaway and the Aswan Dam or World War II) on different continents (Canada, Africa and Europe) and at different times (1950s, 1960s, 1940s). Michaels thus also achieves to weave together the several similar traumatic experiences and memories of her characters. She shows that they do not stand alone, but are actually part of a world,

where trauma can appear at every street corner. As Jean rightly states, “[o]ne could probably not walk a block without stepping into a place of mourning; we could not mark them all” (Michaels, *TWV* 105); each place may be “drenched with sorrow” (Michaels, *TWV* 107).

It is not only through her choice of narrators that Michaels allows the reader to witness how recovery from trauma may occur. The healing of the characters is also mirrored in the development of some motifs. For example, landscapes in *Fugitive Pieces* and riverbeds in *The Winter Vault* start out as containers for grief and destruction<sup>170</sup>. In time, however, the landscape changes from a container of grief into a place where one can feel again at home and at peace. For Jakob “[i]t is [...] among Michaela’s birches that [he] feel[s] for the first time safe above ground, earthed in a storm” (Michaels, *FP* 189). In Jean’s case, the dried out riverbeds from the beginning of the novel, may bloom again, because Jean plants the seeds from the flowers she has collected there in fertile earth.

Michaels also uses symbols to illustrate her characters’ personality and dealing with traumas. Athos, for example, is compared to limestone (Michaels, *FP* 78). He is wounded through his traumas, full of holes, but he does not go down. The traumatized and numbed Jean is compared to seeds which do not bloom, because they have not found fertile ground. However, she is also like those seed “that can survive in water without germinating” (Michaels, *TWV* 140) and in the end there is hope for change, hope that she will find fertile ground again. Similarly, she re-interprets the meaning of flowers from signs of grief to signs of life<sup>171</sup>.

With regard to Michaels’s actual portrayal of healing through the means of narrative, her illustrated ways are quite similar to how narratives are used in psychotherapy. Both acknowledge the presence and importance of narrative in everyday life and its healing potential, because it offers a structure, a configuration of several elements into a

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<sup>170</sup> Compare how Jakob reacts to the destroyed Greek landscape and Avery and Jean to the drowning landscapes in Egypt and Canada.

<sup>171</sup> See pages 127, 134.

meaningful plot, the creation of a synthesis between concordant and discordant elements, a special treatment of temporality and a flexibility and dynamics of its form and interpretation.

Of course, Michaels does not only use non-poetic and conventional forms of narratives, but allows her characters to express themselves and their trauma through writing poetry, planting, painting, building houses or reading landscapes. As in the cases of Jakob and Lucjan, she also offers them foreign languages as means for translation or repression of the trauma<sup>172</sup>. However, all the necessary and possible ways to come to terms with one's trauma that have been described under the headings "narrating", "reading" and "telling" are not only used in actual therapy, but are represented in the novels as well.

The last aspect, that is the telling of one's narrative to an empathic listener and re-establishing relationships, is probably the most important one for Michaels. All characters feel the wish, if not even the above mentioned urge to talk, to claim what happened to them and share it with others in order to find recognition and understanding for their trauma, their life narrative and their identity.

Michaels lets her characters find healing primarily through talking to others, but a full recovery is only possible for those characters who find an empathic listener and in her definition this listener needs to be a partner, a soulmate, someone who shares one's memories with the other one. Those characters, i.e. Jakob, Ben, Jean and Avery, who find or already have such a partner, have the most likely chances for healing. Of course, it is hard to meet such a person: Jakob has to take two attempts before he can share his narrative with Michaela and thus be healed. Ben is long blind for the role Naomi could play for him and even risks to lose her by running after Petra. Jean and Avery start out as a promising couple, but their bond is severed by the loss of their child and since they both suffer from the same trauma and cannot claim it, they have to resume their search in order to mature individually before they can come together again. Ben's parents actually face a similar situation: They would need an empathic listener who helps them to move beyond their aberrated mourning and grief, but they do not have the strength; even Naomi cannot motivate them to abandon their isolation. However, like Lucjan, who

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<sup>172</sup> See page 98.

does not find an empathic listener either, they gain at least partial healing through a witness or find comfort and recognition among fellow sufferers. Michaels thus also stresses the healing potential of traumatized communities.

However, despite this emphasis on telling, there are very few instances of longer dialogue in both novels. We only get those lines of the conversation which are most telling and rather learn about what the characters say to each other through the mediation of one of the listeners, be it in their thoughts or memories. We thus do not witness the act of telling, but see how they think about what has been said and which effects the narrative has on the listener. Very often the effect is a cathartic one; it makes them try to deal with their trauma and start to re-interpret it.

In *Fugitive Pieces* those portrayals of dialogue concern the situations which were traumatizing and still have an intrusive character on the experiencer, e.g., the apple incident for Ben. Other direct utterances are, e.g., Athos's pieces of advice or lines of Jakob's poems, which still sound in their ears, because they are important milestones in their way to recovery. In *The Winter Vault* it is especially Lucjan's statements – usually presented in indirect speech – that resound in Jean's head, since she knows that they are meaningful and important for her healing.

Interestingly, Michaels introduces no therapist who would have the professional competence to help the characters. Her portrayal of healing through narrative thus differs from classic psychotherapy, where it is first and foremost the therapist who should take the position of an empathic listener or witness. If one looks however more closely, one can detect some characters who step into the role of the therapist and these "therapist characters" are crucial for healing: In *The Winter Vault* Marina acts as an advisor and listener especially for Avery (Michaels, *TWV* 191) and Lucjan takes the role of a therapist and teacher for Jean. In *Fugitive Pieces*, there is Athos who helps the young Jakob to come to terms with his trauma. Jakob and his account of this healing progress in turn help Ben to confront the ghosts of his past. Ben actually addresses the older man as if he would like to get some advice. He turns to his work for answers and, since

narratives can take the role of the therapist<sup>173</sup>, through this “conversation” Ben gains indeed a catharsis.

Of course, those therapist characters differ from a conventional therapist. They motivate their “patients” to claim their trauma and integrate it into their life narrative offering them, e.g., the processes of geology as means to understand their trauma and re-interpret it. Or they use historical events like the destruction of Warsaw to illustrate their point. This kind of motivation to re-interpret one’s narrative certainly differs from conventional therapy, in which the patient is usually kept in the actual world and invited to use direct, non-figural language<sup>174</sup> or conventional forms of narrative like letters<sup>175</sup> to claim her/his trauma. Nevertheless, the ways Michaels offers her characters to transform their trauma function as well. At first Jakob and Ben use facts about natural catastrophes as “drugs” (cf. Michaels, *FP* 119) to repress their trauma, but later they also apply them to illustrate the destructive quality of trauma. Jakob also uses his knowledge about geology to understand that “[g]rief requires time. If a chip of stone radiates its self, its breath, so long, how stubborn might be the soul?” (Michaels, *FP* 54).

However, as only few find their empathic listener, not everyone is lucky enough to find such a therapist character. One could therefore argue that in Michaels’s novels the possibility for a full recovery from trauma depends partly on one’s luck to find a therapist character and/or the perfect empathic listener. From this viewpoint, Lucjan and Ben’s parents simply have no chance to recover. On the other hand, even those characters who are unlucky in their search for an empathic listener do not remain stagnated in their trauma. Michaels shows that as long as one has someone (even if s/he is also traumatized and unable to claim her/his past), who can understand one’s trauma, it is not impossible to move on, to find some meaning in one’s life. In this context, she therefore strongly underlines the power and importance of love and relationships/companionships. She thus takes a similar stance to Frankl (see *Man’s*

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<sup>173</sup> As has been claimed by bibliotherapy (see above: van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 58-59; Riemeyer 83-84).

<sup>174</sup> For example, Schauer, Neuner and Elbert’s (26-43) description of the procedure in NET shows that they try to keep the patient to the actual realm and not allow him to describe his trauma through metaphors; one goal of this process is to produce a testimony or eyewitness account.

<sup>175</sup> See White and Epston’s (chapter 4) discussion of the use of different forms of letters. Although they also mention the possibility to write partially imaginative (e.g. by adopting different names or animals as substitute for oneself) stories about oneself (see White and Epston 160-163).

*Search* 111-112), according to whom we perceive and grasp another human being only through love and this love can give meaning to the life of both the loving and beloved person.

To sum up, despite the above mentioned deviations and Michaels's strong emphasis on the necessity of an empathic listener and a relationship for a successful recovery from trauma, it is fascinating to see in how far her description of her characters' use of narrative as means for healing corresponds with the methods used in psychotherapy. Michaels may be familiar with them, but these similarities also prove once again how deeply interconnected narrative is with our lives. As she shows in her novels, it seems that there simply is this deep desire in human beings to tell one's story, to communicate with others, to receive recognition and understanding for one's identity and to find someone who loves us enough so that we can share our very being with her/him.

The similarities between the usage of narrative in psychotherapy and by Michaels further proves that literature is a field where in an aesthetic manner the same aspects, ideas, theories or practices may be developed, tested and proven to function as are investigated in science or sociology. As an example of such a correlation the exchange about psychoanalysis between Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler, an Austrian author, should be mentioned. Although they never met or discussed their ideas, they came up with quite similar observations and Freud actually wrote a letter to Schnitzler expressing his surprise about this:

Ich meine, ich habe Sie gemieden aus einer Art von Doppelgängerscheu. [...] [I]ch habe immer wieder, wenn ich mich in Ihre schönen Schöpfungen vertiefe, hinter deren poetischem Schein die nämlichen Voraussetzungen, Interessen und Ergebnisse zu finden geglaubt, die mir als die eigenen bekannt waren. [...] Ja ich glaube, im Grunde Ihres Wesens sind sie ein psychologischer Tiefenforscher, so ehrlich unparteiisch und unerschrocken wie nur je einer war (Freud in Scheible, *Schnitzler* 143-144)

Ich habe mich oft verwundert gefragt woher Sie diese oder jene geheime Kenntnis nehmen könnten, die ich mir durch mühselige Erforschung des Objektes erworben und endlich kam ich dazu, den Dichter zu beneiden, den ich sonst bewunderte. (Freud 95 in Scheible, *Nachwort* 105)

Michaels's novels may be a similar example of such a correlation of ideas.



### 6.3.2 The novels in context

This section finally investigates the status of Michaels's novels within the context of trauma theory and literature about the Holocaust and which answer she gives to the apparent impossibility to narrate and recover from trauma. When one deals with such poetic novels that describe trauma, one simply has to consider Adorno's claim that any attempt to write aesthetic literature after Auschwitz is impossible and inappropriate and if one emphasizes that characters suffering from such trauma can be healed, one also has to consider Caruth's contradictory conviction that trauma is forever unclaimed.

On the textual level, all characters use the several ways narrative offers, i.e., through narrating, reading or telling them, as means to come to terms with trauma. It depends on the individual which ways s/he chooses, with which pace s/he moves towards healing and to which degree s/he achieves recovery. Jakob constantly searches for an empathic listener who shares his trauma and his grief, while Ben's parents and Lucjan have already given up that hope. They rather look for comfort from other traumatized people. Ben, Jean and Avery only gradually overcome their anger or fear and start to face their trauma. In general, however, all characters attempt to develop the strength to move on with their lives, to find meaning and comfort as best as they can and not to succumb totally to their trauma, and as it turns out, they are indeed able to claim it (at least partly), to transform it into something meaningful and tell it to others. The novels thus do not portray Caruth's conviction that trauma has to remain forever unclaimed and destructive to a person's life. Furthermore, the characters mostly choose aesthetic ways, e.g., writing or reading poetry, painting or planting, as forms of narrating their trauma. This therefore stands in contrast to Adorno's stance that any form of aesthetic representation of the Holocaust or trauma in general is inappropriate.

At the same time, the characters know that it is difficult to represent trauma or to pay true respect to those who can no longer tell their story. They see that a trauma narrative may not grasp it in its entirety and they are aware of the problem that language and narratives can distort reality and memory and thus also destroy the trauma's accuracy. In some cases they even acknowledge that one cannot come to a full understanding of trauma or represent it in its very truth or completeness; some parts (e.g., Bella's or

Lucjan's mother's fate; the fate of the Jews) will be forever lost, some experiences (e.g., the murder of Jakob's parents) forever fragmented, some memories (e.g., Athos's loss of his wife, Ben's parents' loss of their children) too painful to be claimed. Every attempt to create a narrative about them can only be achieved by imagination or some distortion of reality. There is even some sort of apology in *Fugitive Pieces* when Jakob writes: "Forgive this blasphemy, of choosing philosophy over the brutalism of fact" (Michaels, *FP* 168).

However, both Jakob and Ben, the protagonists of *Fugitive Pieces*, choose a fragmented and distorting narrative over the maintenance of an intrusive truth and the main characters of *The Winter Vault*, Jean and Lucjan likewise come to the understanding that above all trauma needs to be made meaningful. They all decide not to succumb to their trauma, not to despair about the loss of truth, but they choose to move on, to look for meaning, even if it includes some meddling with the past.

On another level, with her novels that strongly argue in favour of recovery from trauma and which "present themselves in writing that is lyrical, highly poetic and densely metaphoric" (Cook 12)<sup>176</sup>, Michaels opposes the stance that nowadays former concepts like reason, goodness, justice and freedom are apparently lost; neither does she think it impossible to express trauma and grasp its reality and truth via language (cf. Parry 353-354). She belongs to the numerous counter-movements which claim that trauma can be overcome if one works through the traumatic experiences and memories, mourns the losses and re-evaluates and re-writes one's life narrative. According to Criglington "she is particularly concerned with understanding how those who come after can commemorate the catastrophes that have indirectly yet profoundly affected them" (88) and Michaels herself says:

I wanted to look as closely as I could at how people carry on, or how they perhaps can not only carry on but carry an event with them and still move towards a place of love in the world [...] I headed for the largest and most devastating reality possible, in order to try to understand how one emerges from that. (Michaels, *Narrative Moves* qtd. in Bölling 174)

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<sup>176</sup> Several other critics (Quennet; Krote 532; Haun 169) agree that Michaels writes in a very poetic language.

Michaels thus does not depict trauma in its life-destroying and future-denying form, but rather concentrates on how it is overcome and which ways characters use to claim and transform it.

Like other authors<sup>177</sup>, she has of course been criticized for adopting the role of Holocaust victims and portraying memories that cannot be her own in an aesthetic way. Especially her use of figurative language has been accused of being inappropriate for narratives about the Holocaust (cf. Krote 532). According to Cook (16-18)<sup>178</sup>, her poetic language may conceal the horror and cruelty of the genocide; she, e.g., sees hardly any difference between the portrayal of love scenes or traumatic events. King also claims that “whilst the novel is a moving evocation of loss and absence, Michaels’ use of the idea of biological or archaeological memory mystifies human agency and offers moments of false consolation” (121).

However, according to Omhòvère (85)<sup>179</sup>, Michaels, by letting her characters having doubts about the appropriateness of language, also seems to acknowledge that one can never represent the accuracy of trauma in this way. Therefore, “[t]he lyricism of the novel is not a denial of the horrors of the Holocaust so much as a lament or elegy with abiding hollowness at its core, the starkly outlined space of horror and loss” (Williams and Polatinsky 11). Nevertheless, she concentrates on how trauma is overcome and which ways characters use to claim and transform it and with her use of metaphoric language she tries to find a form to bear witness to the past. According to Anker (53)<sup>180</sup> metaphors are indeed necessary for one’s recovery, because they allow one to distance oneself from trauma through distorting the reality a bit, to deal with the trauma creatively or even symbolically, to transform memories (Anker 55-57). It is thus no coincidence that Jakob is a poet and translator and Athos a geologist and archaeologist and that they use nature as metaphors for their transformation of the traumatic experiences (Quennet).

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<sup>177</sup> For example, Sylvia Plath (see Gubar, *Prosopopoeia* 112) or Benjamin Wilkomirski (see Chambers 92).

<sup>178</sup> See also King (146-147).

<sup>179</sup> See also Kandiyoti (327).

<sup>180</sup> See Anker’s article for a detailed discussion of the metaphors’ form and quality in *Fugitive Pieces* and Michaels’s use of them.

By writing such novels Michaels responds to Adorno (Cook 12-13) and argues against his statement (Krote 520; Bentley). Gubar even claims that her novels “[propose] that after the Holocaust it is barbaric *not* to write and read literature” (*Empathic Identification* 251). Bearing in mind the problem of representing the unspeakable through language, she writes in favour of recovery from trauma. She tells her readers that trauma need not be eternally haunting and intrusive, but that it can be claimed in many ways and then integrated as a meaningful component into one’s life narrative. Even if the methods include the distortion of reality through imagination or proxy-witnessing, she clearly argues for a life- and future-affirming attitude towards trauma.

## **7 FINAL CONCLUSION**

Let us once again return to the relation between the terms “trauma” and “narrative”. This thesis has shown how far these concepts are inherent in our everyday life and to what degree they depend on each other: Our life and identity are understood, developed and structured through narratives and we also interact with others through exchanging them. This leads to the idea of a life narrative, i.e., the creation of a continuous plot that orders the discordant and concordant elements of our lives into a meaningful whole and enables us to convey our experiences, feelings and thoughts to others and allows us find our place among them. One’s life narrative and identity, their continuity and order can however be disrupted or destroyed by trauma. Its intrusive and simultaneously elusive character makes it incomprehensible and ungraspable for any transformation into a narrative and subsequently for any integration into one’s life narrative and identity. Nevertheless, it has been underlined that trauma need not remain unclaimed forever and narrative serves actually as the very means for recovery from it.

All these aspects have been illustrated with regard to Anne Michaels’s novels *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault*. As long as their main characters Ben, Jakob, Jean, Avery and Lucjan can uphold a coherent and meaningful life narrative, they can face the difficulties and challenges of their lives and try to integrate them and open their narrative for a meaningful future. However, each of them experiences traumatic

incident(s) in their lives and are confronted with the disruption and destruction of that former continuity and order.

Both texts are thus certainly about trauma and its various sources and they give a convincing description of trauma's unclaimed character and the different consequent effects it provokes in the characters. Michaels portrays how they are overwhelmed and rendered speechless and directionless by their traumatic experiences and memories. She lets them suffer from intrusions, haunting nightmares and ghosts; from survivor guilt, transgenerational trauma and the crisis of bearing witness to the truth and shows how they either drift into numbness and repression or desperately struggle to work through their trauma. The novels' structure, motifs or titles and intertitles likewise hint to trauma and its characteristics. Therefore, trauma theory has proven to be very helpful and efficient for the discussion and interpretation of the novels' stories, discourse and character development.

However, it has also been proven that the novels are texts about healing. Their message is that one can indeed recover from even the worst and most horrible experiences and find meaning and happiness in life. Furthermore, as many representatives from the field of psychotherapy, Michaels argues in favour of the healing potential of narrative. Through narrating, reading and telling narratives about trauma one can translate it into a language, transform it into something meaningful, consequently integrate it into one's life narrative and identity and thus re-establish continuity and order in one's life and reconnect to others. Despite some differences Michaels's illustration of the healing process corresponds significantly to the use of narrative in psychotherapy, which has thus been a helpful guideline for interpreting the portrayal of her characters' recovery.

According to Gubar, "[v]irtually every character in Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* [and also in *The Winter Vault*] is a writer of some sort or another, and most become devoted readers of each others' works" (*Empathic Identification* 251) and King likewise confirms that recovery from trauma is "enacted through the powers of storytelling" (126). Ben, Jakob, Athos, Marina, Lucjan, Jean and Avery all try to translate their trauma into some kind of language, be it the creation of poetry, paintings, buildings or gardens, and wish to transform it into something meaningful to be integrated into their

life narratives. They find help in reading others' narratives or sharing them with witnesses and empathic listeners who assure them of help and understanding or love and companionship. They learn that running from their past or repressing their traumas leads to nothing, but that they actually have to confront them. Not all of them may recover totally, because it is a hard task to fulfill, and it takes a lot of strength. Nevertheless, in the end they all come out as stronger or at least more mature people who once again can face a meaningful future.

At first glance, the novels appear to be indeed rather depressing, especially the endings. Jakob's sudden death, for example, leaves one with the question whether his coming to terms with trauma has been of any use for him. Ben's parents are likewise no longer able to claim their traumatic memories and Ben, Avery, Jean and Lucjan have not yet arrived at a closure. They attempt to claim and transform their life narratives and identities, but they are either at the beginning of their healing process or so stagnated that they do no longer try to come to terms with it. However, when one shuts the books, one does so with a positive feeling. Jakob and Marina managed to overcome their traumas so that they do no longer dominate their lives and they could find happiness in their marriages. Those characters, i.e., Ben's parents and Lucjan, who are still stagnated, reach at least a state where they are able to live more or less peacefully and through their membership in a supporting traumatized community still see meaning in their lives and can even help others. Finally, it is the tone with which Ben, Jean and Avery end their narratives and the way they express their eagerness and wish to overcome their traumas that suggests to the reader that they are actually full of hope for a future that will bring them healing and new meaning.

*Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault* thus show that trauma occurs in many forms and to everyone and that it is indeed a fatal blow to one's life narrative and identity. However, Michaels's portrayal of the characters' struggle also illustrates that trauma need not be life destructive. It can be transformed and claimed through narrating and sharing the traumatic experiences and memories and as such may no longer be an impediment, but even life-enriching. Neither does she support the conviction that any form of representation is inappropriate and distorting of trauma's accuracy. As long as one comes to terms with it, every method is possible, if not even desirable. Her novels

thus prove the strong relation between life and narrative, as it has been claimed in literary studies, and, as psychotherapists claim, she underlines that this connection offers us means to deal with trauma, to overcome it successfully and find meaning and happiness in our lives.

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## **DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

Der Titel dieser Arbeit, zu Deutsch „Trauma und das heilbringende Potenzial von Erzählung“, fasst bereits ihre zwei Hauptgesichtspunkte zusammen. In unserer heutigen Zeit nehmen Trauma und Erzählung einen wichtigen Bestandteil in unserem täglichen Leben ein, und es wird daher untersucht, in wieweit diese Konzepte verbunden sind und wie diese Verbindung schlussendlich zur Heilung von Trauma führen kann. Das Medium, anhand dessen diese Beziehung besprochen und illustriert wird, sind die zwei Romane *Fugitive Pieces* (dt. *Fluchtstücke*) und *The Winter Vault* (dt. *Wintergewölbe*) der kanadischen Autorin Anne Michaels.

Da beide Romane Trauma und den Versuch von traumatisierten Charakteren Heilung zu finden thematisieren wird einerseits untersucht ob die allgemeine, traditionelle und zeitgenössische Traumatheorie als Interpretationshilfe von Romanen geeignet ist. Andererseits wird versucht die gängigen Heilungsmethoden aus der Psychotherapie, Geschichtswissenschaft und Literaturwissenschaft, die Erzählung als Hilfsmittel benutzen, auch als Richtlinie für die Interpretation des Heilungsprozesses der Charaktere in den Romanen zu verwenden. Besonders in Hinblick auf dieses Unterfangen wird gezeigt in wieweit die beiden Konzepte miteinander verbunden sind und inwiefern Erzählung tatsächlich ein heilbringendes Potenzial für Trauma besitzt.

Der Ausgangspunkt ist jedoch das Konzept der Erzählung. Der Strukturalismus (u.a. von Roland Barthes) definiert die funktionalen Bausteine einer Erzählung und erläutert genau den Zusammenbau einer Erzählung gemäß einer zugrundeliegenden „Grammatik“. Erzählung ist nun aber auch stark mit der Realität verbunden. Wir

erfassen unsere Welt, Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen und kommunizieren mit anderen mithilfe von Erzählungen. Dieser Zusammenhang führte in den verschiedensten Disziplinen, aber vor allem in Paul Ricoeurs Theorien, zur Entwicklung der Idee einer „Lebensgeschichte“.

Laut diesem Konzept verstehen wir alles, was um uns, in uns und mit uns geschieht durch Erzählungen und integrieren es in eine kontinuierliche Lebensgeschichte. Man kann also durchaus davon sprechen, dass jeder von uns in Gedanken seine eigene Autobiographie schreibt. Unsere Lebensgeschichte erlaubt uns auch eine persönliche und soziale Identität zu entwickeln, und selbst unser Gedächtnis und unsere Erinnerungen sind als Erzählungen strukturiert und als solche immer abrufbar. Es ist uns auch möglich in die Erzählungen anderer einzusteigen und diese so zu erleben, als wären sie unsere eigenen. Durch ein solches Lesen von Erzählungen können wir selbst neue Einsichten für unsere eigene Lebensgeschichte erhalten. Ein weiterer wichtiger Punkt ist, dass uns Erzählungen schlussendlich das Interagieren und Kommunizieren mit anderen ermöglichen; wir brauchen sogar ein Publikum, das uns unsere Auslegung unserer Lebensgeschichte bestätigt, denn nur in zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen wird unsere Geschichte erst vollendet.

Trauma zerstört nun diese Lebensgeschichte. Es ist immer eine Wunde, die der Geschichte und Identität einer Person zugefügt wird und die sie oft hilflos und antriebslos zurücklässt. Laut Cathy Caruth ist Trauma in seinem Charakter zu schrecklich und unverständlich und daher für immer unheilbar. Jeder Versuch es in eine Erzählung zu fassen müsse unweigerlich scheitern, da Sprache dem wahren Gehalt des Traumas niemals gerecht werden könne. Trauma erlaubt also nach Caruth keine Transformation oder Integration in eine Geschichte und die traumatisierte Person ist daher dazu verdammt, das oder die traumatischen Ereignisse immer wieder in Alpträumen, Halluzinationen oder Rückblenden zu erleben. Es dominiert daher das Leben der traumatisierten Person, und solange die Teile der zerstörten Lebensgeschichte und Identität nicht wieder gesammelt, repariert und geordnet worden sind, bleibt die Person selbst zersplittert.



Dieser Charakter von Trauma und die verschiedenen Folgen finden sich tatsächlich in Anne Michaels Romanen. In *Fluchtstücke* wird das Leben von Jakob von dem Mord an seinen Eltern und seinem Unwissen über das Schicksal der verschollenen Schwester dominiert. Zudem fühlt er sich durch seine Stellung als überlebender Jude dazu verpflichtet, Zeugnis über den Mord an seiner Schwester und den Völkermord an den Juden zu bewahren; eine Aufgabe, der er sich lange nicht gewachsen sieht. Auch Bens Eltern haben durch ihre Erlebnisse und Verluste während des Krieges die Fähigkeit verloren ihre Lebensgeschichte zu formulieren und weiterzugeben. Sie geben dieses unausgesprochene Trauma an ihren Sohn weiter, welcher lebenslang darunter zu kämpfen hat. Ben leidet unter Albträumen und Ängsten und wird, nachdem er das Familiengeheimnis aufgedeckt hat, zunehmend von Wut erfüllt.

Im *Wintergewölbe* leiden die Charaktere Marina und Lucjan ebenfalls an ihren traumatischen Erlebnissen während des zweiten Weltkriegs. Beide trauern nach wie vor um den Verlust ihrer ganzen Familie und über die Zerstörung ihres vorigen Lebens. Jean und Avery betrauern zuerst den Tod eines Elternteils, der sie ziellos und einsam zurückließ. Sie finden vorübergehend Frieden und Glück in ihrer Partnerschaft, die aber nach der Stillgeburt ihrer Tochter eine harte Probe durchlaufen muss.

Nun gibt es jedoch auch zahlreiche Stimmen, die, ganz im Gegensatz zu Cathy Caruth, behaupten, dass Trauma vor allem mithilfe und unter Verwendung von Erzählungen geheilt werden kann. Zwei Schritte sind dabei unausweichlich: Einerseits muss man Trauma in eine erzählbare, sinnvolle Geschichte verwandeln, die es kommunizierbar macht. Diese Geschichte muss wiederum in die Lebensgeschichte der jeweiligen Person integriert werden. Der nächste essentielle Schritt ist die Weitergabe der Geschichte, denn nur, wenn die Lebensgeschichte und das inkludierte Trauma erfolgreich von anderen angenommen und respektiert werden, ist vollständige Heilung möglich. Schließlich kann auch das Lesen oder Hören von Geschichten heilend wirken.

In den beiden Romanen findet man nun wieder die oben genannten Formen der Heilung mithilfe von Erzählungen. In *Fluchtstücke* teilen Jakob und Athos ihre Lebensgeschichten und stützen sich dadurch gegenseitig. Vor allem Athos Ratschläge

und Lektionen helfen Jakob sein Trauma in Worte zu fassen und überzeugen ihn auch von der Notwendigkeit des Erzählens, der Aufarbeitung seiner Vergangenheit und der Unausweichlichkeit der Suche nach dem Sinn des Lebens. Es dauert jedoch Jahre bis Jakob die Kraft findet, den Verlust seiner Eltern und seiner Schwester in seinen Gedichten zu verarbeiten. Erst als er in seiner zweiten Frau Michaela einen empathischen Zuhörer findet, der bereit ist sein Trauma mitzutragen, kann er die Toten hinter sich lassen und der Zukunft ins Auge sehen. Ben und zu einem Teil auch seine Eltern versuchen ebenfalls ihr Trauma in Worte zu fassen; jedoch eher erfolglos. Erst durch das Lesen von Jakobs Texten wird Ben klar, wie er sein Trauma erfolgreich in Worte fassen und in seine Lebensgeschichte integrieren kann. Mit dieser Einsicht beginnt er die Beziehung seiner Eltern sowie seine Ehe in einem anderen Licht zu sehen.

Im *Wintergewölbe* findet Marina Heilung durch die Verarbeitung ihres Traumas in Bildern. Ein Eckpfeiler von Avery und Jeans Beziehung, der ihnen hilft die Trauer über den Verlust eines Elternteils zu überwinden, ist wiederum das gegenseitige Austauschen von Erzählungen, Gedanken, Gefühlen und Wissen. Der Verlust ihres Kindes zerstört dieses Band, aber nach und nach wenden sich beide anderen Formen von Erzählungen zu um dieses neue Trauma in Worte fassen zu können. Weiters trifft Jean auf Lucjan und die beiden formen eine eigenartige, aber für Jean heilbringende Beziehung. Lucjan lädt Jean ein, seine Lebensgeschichte zu lesen und hofft dadurch ihr Hilfe zur Bewältigung ihres Traumas zu geben. Jean erlangt mit der Zeit tatsächlich den Mut ihrer Vergangenheit ins Gesicht zu sehen und beginnt ihr Trauma in Worte zu fassen. An diesem Punkt angelangt kann sie auch wieder zu Avery zurückkehren und sich mit ihm auf den Wiederaufbau der gemeinsamen Lebensgeschichte konzentrieren.

Anne Michaels Romane *Fluchtstücke* und *Wintergewölbe* eignen sich demnach dazu, die Verbindung zwischen Trauma, Erzählung und Heilung zu illustrieren. Sie sind Romane über Trauma. Aus diesem Grund eignet sich die Trauma-Theorie durchaus als eine Interpretationshilfe. Sie sind aber vor allem Romane über Heilung und im Besonderen über die heilbringende Wirkung von Erzählungen und Beziehungen, durch die wir Ordnung und Sinn in unserer Identität und Lebensgeschichte finden können.

## APPENDIX

### PLOT SYNOPSES

#### *Fugitive Pieces*

This novel consists of two parts, namely the memoirs of Jakob Beer, a famous poet, and his biographer Ben's account of his childhood experiences and of his search for Jakob's notebooks. Although these two men are just randomly connected, their memories and experiences as well as their problems and search for meaning and happiness share numerous similarities.

Jakob Beer is born into a Jewish family in a small Polish town, where he grows up together with his adored and beautiful elder sister Bella and his best friend Mones. At the age of seven, however, this peaceful life is brutally disrupted by the German invasion. Hidden behind the wallpaper he has to witness how his parents are murdered. Upon emerging from his hiding place he notices that not only the house is on fire, but that his sister has disappeared. He flees, desperate and hopeless and wanders the Polish woods without any orientation or goal. During the day, out of fear for possible persecutors, he digs a hole in the earth and covers himself with leaves. At night he continues his flight. He finds himself in the ruins of Biskupin, a settlement from the iron-age, where he is rescued by Athos, a Greek archeologist. Athos hides him under his clothes and thus smuggles him to Greece and on the small island of Zakynthos. There they spend the war in a little house; distant from the battles and yet close enough to hear about the cruelties against the Greek civil population and the Greek Jews.

After the war, Athos decides to immigrate with his young comrade to Canada. Loaded with the burden of their war experiences and feeling alienated in the foreign country they assimilate only slowly. They are rather preoccupied with collecting facts and information about the Holocaust, about the fate of Athos's colleagues (Athos writes a book commemorating them, called *Bearing False Witness*, which is finished by Jakob) and the search for any traces of Bella.

When Athos dies, Jakob remains alone and devastated. He spends his time musing over photos, newspaper articles and tries to remember his sister through listening to her

music. Through a coincidence he meets and marries Alex, a vital and cheerful Canadian girl, who tries to help Jakob forget his past, but actually misunderstands Jakob's deep dependency on his memories. Through her lack of empathy and Jakob's inability to talk to her, their marriage slowly degrades until Jakob suffers again from nightmares and is haunted by the memory of his sister.

After their divorce, Jakob returns to Greece, to Idhra, where Athos's family house stands. There he writes his first volume of poems, called *Groundwork*, in which he tries to deal with his past and the fate of his family.

On a visit to Canada he meets his second wife Michaela. Her empathy, understanding and warmth finally allow him to lay his past to rest and look into a future. In her company he experiences a period of peace and happiness, but this bliss only lasts for a few years. They return to Greece only to get killed in a car accident.

The second part starts with Ben's description of his childhood. As the child of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Canada after their liberation from the camps, he grows up with a constant awareness of its horrors. His life is dominated by fragments of memories, accounts about "the action" and numerous strange habits and customs whose origin or sense Ben does not understand. As he grows older the distance to his parents increases as does the anger and jealousy he feels towards his wife Naomi, who appears to befriend them so easily and is even entrusted with the family secret. After his parents' death he has to discover that there were two older children who died during the Holocaust. Hurt by his parent's secrecy and blaming his wife for conspiring with them, he takes the opportunity to go to Idhra to look for Jakob's notebooks. Ben has always been an ardent admirer of Jakob's poems and was fascinated by the person he saw behind them. He thought about him as an understanding friend, although Jakob hardly looked at him when they met once at a dinner party.

On the island he then starts an affair with Petra, an American, and spends his days trying to fight off the bad memories of his childhood, the latest shock concerning his discovery of the family secret and the anger about his wife – with little success.

He coincidentally discovers Jakob's memoirs and is deeply moved by them. Realizing that he cannot find healing on Idhra and in the company of Petra, he decides to return, to face his family's history and give his marriage a second chance.

### ***The Winter Vault***

This novel traces the early married life and the terrible loss of Jean, a botanist, and Avery, an engineer. The couple met in the dried out riverbed of the Saint Lawrence River, when they were magically drawn to the site of numerous villages soon to be destroyed by the construction of the canal. Both were suffering from losses and tried to find consolation in this landscape drenched with loss and sadness. They were therefore immediately drawn to each other. The reader is allowed to witness their sensitive and gradual courting until they finally settle happily and full of hope for a bright future with Avery's mother Marina.

When Avery gets an offer to supervise the relocation of the temples at Abu Simbel, Jean accompanies him to Egypt. There they witness the decline of the blooming culture and the close-knit communities in the villages along the Nile and cannot but feel the old sadness. And yet, this is also when they are looking forward to the birth of their first child.

However, as the waters destroy the homes and lives of the Nubian people, their personal happiness and hope likewise come to a sudden end. Jean loses the child and this cruel stroke of fate leaves them both lonely in their unbearable grief. Jean falls into deep depressions, withdraws into isolation. Incapable of consoling her and in a desperate attempt to help her, Avery proposes a separation.

They both now wander the Canadian landscape alone again. While Avery seeks consolation in his studies on architecture, Jean starts to plant obsessively in public parks and gardens. On one of her tours she meets Lucjan, an immigrant from Warsaw. They begin a friendship, which soon develops into something more. They form a contract, which consists of Lucjan telling her about his childhood and adolescence in Poland, his experiences during the war and his losses. Jean has to listen. He also introduces her to

his friends; a group of Polish immigrants consisting of, e.g., a jazz band called the *Stray Dogs*, or a theatre company.

In their company Jean learns about the war, the living conditions of Jews in and outside the ghetto, the Warsaw Uprising and the consequent destruction of the city. She hears how people lived in the ruins for months and learns how the city was gradually rebuilt as an exact replica. She also hears about the terrors of the communist regime, which finally made Lucjan and his friends emigrate to Canada. She also experiences the strong bonds of friendship and love between these people and gradually feels safe and strong again. Motivated by their openness and understanding, Jean also gradually starts to narrate her life and finally is strong enough to drive to the grave of her daughter. There she meets Avery and both of them decide to try to re-establish their former intimate relationship.

### ***DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY***

I confirm to have conceived and written this doctoral thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors have been truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

Signature

## HINWEIS

Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin oder der betreffende Kandidat befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen der/des Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Die Habilitierten des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik bitten diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.



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